

**STRANGER
THINGS**



Armageddon

Armageddon Book 5: Rebirth by **inktopia**

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Summary: And thus ends the story of Eleven's birthday, the first one she ever had and maybe the last one where she would see all her friends together. The course of history teaches us a valuable lesson - one cannot run away from darkness. The shade will chase them until the end of time, to the very depths of the cosmos, to their farthest dreams and nearest nightmares. [Completed]

1. Episode 0: Prologue

Introduction: *An ordinary group of civilians from the town of Hawkins - Indiana join forces with an extraordinary girl with telekinetic powers to reclaim their future from their past. Forgotten memories will be remembered, old enemies will resurface and former allies will return as Judgement Day arrives. This is the beginning of the epic that will change the fate of the world. 'Stranger Things 3.0' commences now.*

A/N: *'Armageddon' is structured like a collection of Novella each spread across multiple chapters. So, if you're a new reader then my advice is to treat each Episode as a dedicated story in a series. I'd recommend a hot cup of coffee or Russian vodka and some contemplation between each episode to jumpstart the imagination.*

There will be some references to my previous works where I've established relationships and backstories. I'll stick to mostly the canonical characters as I want to tell their stories.

The first chapter is a sneak peek into the Extended ST Universe. The contents of this chapter will never be edited as it foretells how the world ends.

[Armageddon]

Episode 0: Prologue

'In a certain place, not so far from a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, the torn pages of a book scattered in the wind.'

It was dinner time in the Wheeler house. Karen Wheeler was arranging food on the table. She placed three plates, one each for Ted, Nancy, and Mike, and then groaned in frustration. Mike had gone camping with the Byers and would be spending the weekend there. Nancy had gone to Atlanta on a school trip and will be away for the weekend as well. Karen grimaced, she was becoming so forgetful.

'In a certain place, not so far from a sleeping town called Hawkins,

Indiana, a pen ran out of ink as the lights went off.'

Ted was switching channels on the TV, but there wasn't anything exciting playing that night. He was slowly becoming irritated, but suddenly he froze. A show was playing, a show that brought memories from the past. A father and his child were walking down a path hidden in a forest. Leaves scattered in the winds as the forest welcomed them in its abode. He sat down on the lazy boy and pulled a lever.

'In a certain place, not so far from a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, a badge was ripped from a uniform.'

Karen placed some chicken on Ted's plate and sighed, *'the man was becoming obsessed with chicken, just as Mike had become so obsessed with Eggos since last year.'* She poured some milk into a glass and placed it in front of a small chair. She set a bowl of cereals besides the glass and called out "Holly, come for dinner. Holly?" Holly was nowhere to be seen. Karen pressed the bridge of her nose with the thumb and index of her right hand and breathed, "That kid!"

'In a certain place, not so far from a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, a batter missed the ball that streaked by his bat.'

Holly heard her mother calling for her, and she made a funny face. She didn't want to drink milk again, so she had decided to hide in Mike's bedroom. She was going through a book that she had scavenged from Mike's drawer. It was filled with lots of pictures and strange words. It was different from all the other books in his room. It was very old, and the papers had become yellow. But she liked the pictures; they looked like the paintings in her father's room.

'In a certain place, near a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, the remaining wall of a castle fell down.'

She opened a random page and immediately started laughing. A man wearing strange silver-colored clothing rode a majestic horse toward a great wall. It was a magnificent picture. She squinted her eyes to read the name of the horse. It read *'Wind.'* Holly really liked that name. She decided to ask Santa for a horse like that next year.

'In a certain place, near a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, a skateboard rolling downhill came to a stop.'

Holly tilted the book towards the light and opened another page. The picture showed a ground with no trees, or houses, or animals. It was empty except for the man dressed in strange silver-colored clothes who was lying on the ground. Red ink spotted the man's dress and the field around him. In front of the man, the sky was covered in black ink. She didn't like that. Some strange looking monsters were coming out of the black ink. She didn't like them at all.

'In a certain place, not so far from a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, a radio came to life for the last time.'

Holly turned the next page, and it showed the man's face. He had a square face full of grey beard and had many cuts on his face. Then she noticed the eyes and gasped in amazement. They were the eyes of a brave man, a man who didn't fear the monsters coming towards him. She read the word, 'Defiance.' Her dad had explained it to her once, *'It means someone who is not afraid to rise up against bad people.'*

'In a certain place, not so far from a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, a small toy rocket came crashing down on earth'.

Holly noticed that the monsters were still coming. She was sure that the monsters wanted to hurt the man, so she urged the man to run away from there. She turned the next page and bent over the picture. The man was facing the hoard of monsters by himself. The picture showed the man's back as he was kneeling on the ground on one foot, but his head was held high. He had one hand placed on his raised knee and another fist raised towards the sky. Even in front of so many monsters, the man would not run away. She read the word, 'Justice,' she knew its meaning. She felt proud for some unknown reason.

'In a certain place, not so far from a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, a human who believed, finally embraced mortality.'

Holly heard her Mommy calling her in an angry tone. Holly embraced 'Defiance' and turned another page. Then she lifted the book in her hands in a quick motion. Holly looked at the picture

carefully. The man was reaching for the skies as a bright light shone from the sky onto his raised hand. An even brighter object gleamed through that light, it had a long curved shape with a golden handle, a sliver of white light flashed below the handle. The rest of the object was adorned with magnificent patterns. Holly looked in awe as the darkness recoiled from that light, the monsters covered their eyes and screamed in agony. She read the words written in big letters next to the picture; she spelled them one word at a time.

"The Sword of Destiny has returned to The Last Knight."

'In a certain place, not so far from a sleeping town called Hawkins, Indiana, a door made of wood burst into a shower of splinters and a man with white hair and wearing a black suit walked in to claim what was rightfully his.'

And this is how the world ends.

2. E1: Justice - Act I

Summary: *Mike and Eleven have ultimately reunited since they lost each other a year back in a classroom where the lights flickered and a nightmare came to life. They have finally found a beautiful moment to cherish their bond, but a monster from Eleven's past has finally awakened and had taken a vow to take back what is rightfully it's. Can Mike celebrate the most crucial day in Eleven's life properly before the world ends?*

Episode 1: Justice

Prologue

"Tell that story again," the little boy clapped his hands in excitement.

"Again? Okay!" The old man smiled.

He slowly sat beside the boy and spoke in a rumbling voice, "One day, somewhere up in the sky, somewhere far away from here, a name was written amongst the stars even before it had a soul. It burnt fiercely and bathed the cosmos with blinding light."

He paused a moment and then continued, "But the Star was sad because like all other heavenly bodies it was destined to die alone in the vast cosmos."

"But it never noticed a fiery comet that was streaking towards it through the cosmos, leaving a violet light in its wake," an old woman uttered the names as she joined them.

The boy's eyes went wide with awe even though he had heard the story many times, "I know those names, they are..."

The old man interjected, "You know the names boy. But do you know what they stood for? You don't have the slightest clue."

Act I: The Past

"That'll be a dollar and fifty, Miss," the shopkeeper laid a small parcel on the counter.

"Miss?"

The slender woman standing in front of the counter jerked her head towards the man in surprise. She was lost in thoughts that undoubtedly made her happy. The woman smiled absently and then carefully picked the parcel up in her hands.

"Here, keep the change," she gave a note to the man and started walking towards the door. A small photo frame caught her attention as she was about to open the door. She picked it up in her hand and scrutinized it as if she was thinking about making a purchase. The shopkeeper bent forward and looked at the woman; "Only a dollar, Miss. Very hardy frame, won't break that easy."

The woman nodded and came to the counter to make the payment, '*It was perfect.*' The man took the photo frame from her hands and started wrapping it in a blue colored paper. Just before making the payment, the woman asked, "Excuse me, what's the time?"

"Sorry Miss, the clock stopped working since yesterday. Tried changing batteries. Still, the damn hands are stuck at 10.59. I reckon they still tell the time correctly twice a day," the man laughed. The woman gave a shrug and handed the man a note. This time she took the change.

At the same time, somewhere far away from the store, a black sedan was cruising smoothly through the busy traffic as it made its way to an unknown destination. Two people sitting at the back were going through an old file, its age could be guessed from the worn-out cover that had lost its original color.

"There!" the man pointed to a photograph that was apparently taken a long time ago. The woman sitting beside him picked up the picture and studied it carefully. It was too old to notice all the details, there were cracks all over the paper, but an object caught the woman's attention.

"You sure we can't find it?" The woman was curious. It looked like a straightforward item, old but simple.

"I'm sure. I've tried, and I've failed, I tracked one of them outside the country last year but lost it at the end."

"There's more than one?"

"We commissioned two of them, one for use and another for backup. It was dangerous to create more as it could have led to a loss of control." The man knew what he was talking about.

"Okay, so there are two of these, you lost yours..."

The man fanned his palm in front of his face in irritation, "It was an accident, I kept it in a very secure place."

"Uh huh, so the other"

"...is at our destination." The man didn't let her finish, "It's at a safe place, apparently hidden from the world."

"But there's another one outside the country, didn't you say there were only two?" there was an alarm in the woman's voice.

"No, the one I tracked last year was probably mine, it was probably procured by someone who will never understand it's true value. Still, I have no clue how it went around half the world."

"Can't you just make a copy? You said you remembered the details, how hard can it be? It's not rocket science." The woman was clearly irritated with the car ride.

"I remember it as if its right in front of me, I know how it looks, how much it weighs, how tall or short it is, how it feels like holding it. I KNOW IT BECAUSE I FUCKING MADE IT." The man screamed out the last words.

But a moment later he composed himself and sighed, "A duplicate won't do. I know how it works. We're going to retrieve the second and the last remaining one. End of discussion." the finality in the man's voice was audible.

On the other side of the city, the slender woman was strolling along the road that led to her destination. She was almost running, but the truth was that she actually felt like dancing. It had been so long since she had felt such happiness. She turned the curve and then suddenly stopped in front of a flower shop. A beautiful bouquet of bright flowers caught her attention. She went to the florist and asked him to make her a smaller one. The man looked at her in surprise, the bouquet was an odd choice for the event which the woman spoke of, but she was determined to get it. She told the florist to keep the change. Before leaving, she requested the florist to add one more flower to the bouquet, again a strange choice. It was nothing critical, nothing that cost extra money but it was something that made her happy and left the florist baffled.

The black sedan was idling in front of the red light, engines growling as if a hound on the hunt was leashed by its master. People crossed the road in a serpentine line. A couple walked by the windshield. The guy carried an almost brand-new camera while the girl carried a folder in her arms. The couple was smiling at each other as they crossed the street. The men bent forward to get a good look through the windshield, he eyed the couple as they crossed the street. The woman was curious, "What's up? Know these two?" The man didn't answer the question. He comfortably sat back and opened the file. His eyes were fixated on the photograph.

The slender woman finally reached home. She had to walk a long way to get here, but she was happy because it was worth the journey. Maybe she'll repair the car once she had enough money. Now that the bad times were over, anything could be possible. She fumbled the key and inserted it in the lock at the fifth attempt as her hands kept shaking. She opened the door, went inside and pushed the door behind her. At first glance, it appeared as if the house was empty, but it won't be for long. She smiled, today was a beautiful day, and she would ensure everything goes according to her plan.

'Her dreams would come true today.'

She placed her bag on the table and went straight to the kitchen, all

the while humming a song that crept into her mind, *'Summertime'* by Ella Fitzgerald. A moment later, she picked a plate from the utensils rack and proceeded to unpack the small box that she had purchased. The box was packed a bit too thoroughly. She spent some time patiently removing the tapes, brought out a small item from that box and placed it at the center of the plate. The item had a unique text inscribed on the top that would have made no sense to anyone. In fact, if people knew the true purpose of the item, they would have rolled their eyes at the stupidity. But she smiled and thought, 'It's perfect, just perfect.' Once the preparations were complete, she left the kitchen and moved upstairs to execute the next steps of her small but grand plan. She kept humming 'Summertime,' as she reached a room at the end of a corridor and turned the latch. With barely contained excitement she opened the door and stepped into unmade memories. Tears came to her eyes as she realized that those memories were no longer just a fragment of her imagination, they had already been made by someone else. She opened a wardrobe and took out a photo that had not seen the light of the day in a rather long time. But it was time to assign it to its rightful place in this house. She carefully cleaned the photo and placed it in the frame that she had bought today.

The black sedan cruised smoothly through the last stretch of the highway and entered a small lane that led to a sleepy neighborhood. The man suddenly closed the file and peeked outside, it had been a lifetime since he was last here. He tried to think about the last time, there were memories, but they were neither happy nor sad. He sighed and nodded at the woman sitting beside him. In response, the woman picked up a small briefcase and placed it on her lap.

The slender woman placed the plate and the photo on a small tea table in the middle of the room. Then she went outside and returned with the bouquet, it was out of the packaging and was now resting in an old flower vase. The flower vase had a sinuous black line wrapped around its base. She grinned at the figure sitting in front of her, "Today is a good day, in fact, I'd say today is the second-best day of our lives!"

Suddenly the bell rang, and the woman glanced back in irritation. She kept hoping that the person would go away, but to her dismay, the bell kept ringing.

She sighed, "I'll be right back."

The women went to the door and noticed that the chain was dangling from the hook. Did she forget to put it back after her arrival? But today was a good day so nothing could go wrong. She opened the door and noticed two persons standing outside. A man and a woman stood in the shadows, they were well dressed and carried a certain sense of authority. She switched on the porch light to get a better look at them and then her heart stopped. She remembered the man, in fact, she recognized the man as if they had met yesterday. He represented a forgotten past that was written in blood. She slammed the door on them and ran back to the room to dial a number.

A moment later two muffled sounds rang in the air, and two moments later the door crashed open as the man and women entered the house and made their way to the room. The woman dialed the last digit of the number from her recent memory when she heard another muffled sound. She was suddenly hit by a powerful force that threw her onto the carpet. The receiver flew away from her hand and crashed into the wall then came to rest beside her head.

It took her a moment to realize that her back was on fire. It felt as if someone had inserted a glowing hot rod between her ribcage and was twisting it around to find where her heart was. Tears flooded her vision as she tried her best to crawl forward. But it was too painful, and she couldn't breathe anymore. Suddenly she felt a strange liquid with metallic taste coming up her throat, it choked her windpipe, and she gasped to take breaths.

Something rattled within her, and she glanced upward and focused her eyes on the table. She saw the plate, the photo and the flowers, and the indistinctive figure sitting behind them. With a shock, she realized that she would die today. But she needed to save the person sitting on the chair at all costs. She gritted her teeth in desperation and used the last bit of her remaining strength to turn her head around and came face to face with the man with white hair and a black suit.

"Hello, Becky!" Dr. Martin Brenner greeted her in a pleasant tone.

At that instant in time, somewhere not far away from that city, a boy named Mike Wheeler was standing under a torrent of water. The steady stream of water rained down from above and washed away the soap that covered his body. He ran his hands all over his body to clean the soap as best as he could. Suddenly he winced in pain as his hands touched the back of his thigh. There was a knot there, right where a bullet from a silenced 22 cal. had entered the leg and then proceeded to puncture a major artery. The wound had bled severely which put his body in a shock and then his heart just stopped working. Mike should've been dead, but then a girl with magic powers jumpstarted his heart and saved his life. It was a medical marvel but the crazy fact was that she was not a doctor, she was a thirteen-year-old kid with some ordinary telekinetic powers. That was supposed to be an impossible task, but Mike Wheeler always believed in impossibility. His belief saved him that day, and another day, and another day before that. In fact, he lost the count of times Eleven had saved his life. He also knew that Eleven will save him the next day, the day after that, and another day after that. He wasn't ashamed about that fact. Boys in school would laugh at the news that Mike Wheeler needed a girl to save his weak ass. But he knew something few else in the world knew. He knew that he had saved Eleven many times, from herself.

Mike turned the knob to stop the shower and used the towel to dry himself. Then he put on some nightclothes and went back to his room where his mother was sitting on his bed. She kissed her boy and then left the room. He lied in bed and started thinking about Eleven. He had not seen her for a long time. After he was released from the hospital, he was put under house arrest by Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, who were actually Nazis under disguise in his opinion. Mike knew that he was absolutely fine, but the wound in his leg would still burn at times. And his family was determined about not buying a new cycle for him, especially after he crashed the earlier one on his way back from the Snowball.

Hopper, the local police chief, was a crazy bastard, and unfortunately, he was also Eleven's father. Sometime after the ordeal,

he had taken Eleven back to the cabin and had not let her come out as well, *'House Arrest.'* Mike wondered if she even understood what the term meant. But she also needed rest just like he did. While he was fighting for his life on the streets of Hawkins, Eleven was fighting a battle with herself to save her soul. Eleven still visited him sometimes in his dreams, but it had been a long time since he had run his hands through her *'Poofy'* hair or kissed her. The thought made him blush.

Mike had kissed Eleven a total of four times. Thrice under proper circumstances, once under tremendous pressure when Eleven was about to snap the neck of the man who had shot Mike on that fateful night. It didn't matter, the kisses were still fantastic. But still not as much amazing as Eleven, and her beautiful smile and fluffy cheeks, Mike smiled. Suddenly there was a knock at his window, and Mike's heart stopped for a moment.

He looked up, fully expecting to see a man climbing inside with a wicked looking gun and taking aim at him. Then he saw the most incredible sight he had ever seen. The ranking changed from time to time, but this was a fantastic sight indeed. Eleven, the girl from his dreams was sitting on the window, flashing a smile that defeated the sun and dangling her legs freely below the pane. *'What the fuck?'* Oh, it was a dream after all. Then he got up and reached the window.

Eleven jumped down and hugged him tightly. He instinctively ran his hand through her hair. It was so *'Poofy,'* he needed that shampoo to try himself. She smelled like Strawberries. A few seconds later she left the embrace and studied him with her big soulful eyes.

"Hello, Mike!"

"Umm, it's you, right? It's not a dream?"

"Why would this be a dream?"

"Okay, you are sitting on my window at 11 PM, and it's not a dream. Is Hopper okay?" Mike was alarmed. There was no way Hopper would have let her out of the house at night.

"He's right there." Eleven pointed towards the sliver of pavement that

was visible from his window.

Suddenly Mike had a sinking feeling inside his stomach. He remembered a lecture given by Mr. Clarke one day. He was explaining about ancient humans who had developed different hunting techniques. One of the key turning points was the invention of traps. The ancient humans would dig a giant hole in the ground, place some leaves to cover it up and put some food on the top. When the animal came to eat the food, they would drop straight into the hole and then the humans would kill it by throwing stones and arrows.

'Barbarians.'

Mike looked out the window and saw a direct line of sight to the pavement, a police van was waiting there. He swallowed and tried to see inside the car. *'Is that a gun?'*

Eleven looked at Mike and laughed heartily, "He brought me here, he told me to check up on you."

Okay, Mike was now sure about three possible scenarios.

First, he was in a dream.

Second, he was dead and had somehow managed to get into heaven.

Third, Hopper was actually a psychopath who was laying a trap to justify shooting Mike since he had kissed his daughter in front of him, on the lips.

It was the third, he told himself. Then he looked at Eleven and was taken aback. Her eyes glittered in the faint light that was coming from the window.

"Eleven?"

"Mike, today is my birthday!"

3. E1: Justice - Act II

Episode 1: Justice

Act II: The Present

In a small city, somewhere in a state called Indiana, a woman named Becky Ives embraced destiny as the man from her past walked towards the table where three items awaited the end of an era. The first item, a cake was inscribed with a name '*Jane Eleven Ives.*' Beside the cake laid a photo of her estranged niece, Jane, given to her by a policeman from the town of Hawkins, Indiana and besides that lied an old vase that contained eleven bright Sunflowers. The policeman had told a name that her niece liked, '*Eleven.*'

Martin looked at the table, clearly amazed to see the items and then laughed. "Damn, I completely forgot, today is my daughter's birthday!"

A chair was placed on the other side of the table. A woman sat in that chair, straight-backed. She looked straight into the eyes of Martin as he crouched in front of the table. She kept repeating a sequence of words like a broken tape recorder. Martin looked at her still eyes and smiled. '*The treatment was effective.*'

Unknown to the world, in that slice of time, somewhere in a sleepy town named Hawkins, Indiana, Mike Wheeler held his soulmate's hand in a tight grip because he was at a loss for words and had no fucking clue about what to do with her. Kissing her was natural, bringing her back from the dead was a little straightforward, fighting a pack of demo-dogs was a piece of cake, lying to his mother about Eleven was somewhat simpler as well. But now he had forgotten the birthday of the most important girl in his life. He thought about Dad who had never forgotten his wife's birthday even once. He could hear his father in his head, "Son, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news. But you are a disgrace."

Eleven understood the predicament and pinched Mike's cheek, "You didn't know. Even I didn't know. Hopper told me a few days back, I never told you." Mike was relieved for a second, but then he cursed,

"Shit. We need a cake."

She smiled at him, and her eyes twinkled as a box floated upwards from somewhere outside and hovered in front of his window, it was floating in the air. Mike gasped at the sight but didn't lose his shit. He believed in the impossible, and he had no problem with the absurd idea of Eleven making a box float with her mind. So, he kept on staring with a slacked jaw as the box was pushed by an invisible hand into his room and landed on his bed.

Mike ran to fetch his Supercom and then froze as reality hit him. He wanted his friends here to celebrate Eleven's birthday. It would be the first with her friends, and it was indeed a moment to cherish. But then he remembered and cursed quietly. First of all, inviting Lucas meant inviting Max. Mike never got to know why Eleven was pissed off at her. He noticed Eleven giving Max the cold shoulder during the night of the Snowball but didn't get the chance to prod further. He remembered how Eleven tightly gripped his arm when Max came to talk to them. *'Was she afraid of Max? That made no fucking sense.'* He also didn't want Max's lifeless body to fly out of his room in the middle of the night and land on Hopper's van. The man had enough on his plate already. Still, he could call Lucas and request him to not bring Max, that might work. But that still left a big problem. If the guys came here, they could not use the door.

"Hi Mrs. Wheeler, we are here to celebrate Eleven's birthday."

"Yup, she was Mike's date for the snowball."

"And yes, she is currently in his room, probably used the window to get in."

"We have no idea what they were doing till now, probably sucking face."

He had heard of *'Gulags'* in Russia, people who went there never left it alive. He was one Supercom message away from being in one. Even if they used the window to get in like Eleven did, it might not work. There were enough reasons for his mom to find out and then.... *'Gulag.'* That kind of ruled out inviting anyone else tonight. He was still waiting in front of the wardrobe when Eleven came close and

caught his arm;

"Mike, its okay. You don't need to call them tonight."

"Uhh, yeah... I mean."

Eleven quickly winked at him, "We'll see them tomorrow. I have a surprise for you."

Mike swallowed, he didn't like surprises anymore, especially since they either ended up abducting his friends, or turned them evil, or tried to end the world, or killed Eleven, or attempted to kill him. Eleven laughed and dragged him back to the bed, where the box waited. Mike opened the box and sighed, it was a beautiful cake that looked like a waffle. He wished he was the one to get it for her. The text on the top stated, 'Jane Eleven Hopper.' Mike understood the *Eleven*, ' he also understood the *Hopper*.'

But "Jane?"

"It's my name, my mother gave it to me."

Mike's jaw made a dash towards the floor, he fucking hated surprises.

Martin ran a hand across the face of the woman who was sitting in front of him. The woman didn't flinch a muscle and kept repeating her mantra. Of course, she couldn't do anything, about a decade back Martin had used electric shock to fry her brain. He still remembered the voltage setting on the dial. '450 v,' enough to cook the brain and part of the spinal cord. The subject lost her memories, sanity and became partially paralyzed. He didn't mind, with all the media attention, killing her would have been difficult. This was considerably easier but at the same time notably worse than death. He didn't care.

"You have a mom?" Mike was simply amazed.

"Don't be funny Mike, everyone has a mom."

Mike swallowed and thought hard about how much of his foot was

currently residing in his mouth.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

Mike knew almost every intricate detail of Eleven's life, he never had to ask her. He had once managed to become a god in a field of fireflies where he touched and lived through Eleven's memories one by one, then he brought her back from the dead. He didn't see her mother there.

"What is she like? I mean, your mom."

"She's very nice Mike. She doesn't speak much, but she speaks to me. She also likes sunflowers, she lives in a city, I met her some time back, I think you should meet her. She will like you, and you'll like her as well." Eleven finished the sentences in a torrent of words as if she had been planning to tell Mike about her for a very long time.

"It's alright El, next time when you go to meet her, I'll come along. But today is your birthday. Shouldn't you be with your mom?" Mike grimaced at the thought but didn't reveal it on his face, Eleven needed her mother more than she needed Mike at the moment. After all, Mike had been in her life for more than a year. Eleven probably didn't get so much time to spend with her mother. *'Hopper, you asshole!'*

Eleven flashed an earnest smile. "Don't worry Mike. I visited her today in my mind. She wished me a happy birthday. We also cut a magic cake." She was pleased.

'What the hell? Can she interact with people in her dreams now? Wasn't it only voice?' Mike hated surprises a lot.

Martin lighted the candles that adorned the top of the cake and proceeded to blow them out with a quick breath. The flame wicked out, and he flashed a happy smile, *'Just like the old days.'* He got up to flex his knees but then stopped mid-way as the candle came back to life with a spark. Martin looked at in awe, as if he was beholding magic. Then he suddenly looked at the woman sitting in front of him and yanked the candles away from the cake. He gritted his teeth in

frustration and threw them out of the room with full force.

Eleven sat on Mike's bed and used her power to keep the door forced against the frame. Mike had warned her, "Mom and Nancy are a pair of thieves, they can open locks."

She could also open locks, did that mean she was also a thief? What would she steal from here? She giggled, she would steal Mike. A sequence of mild knocks came from the door. She instantly translated them on the fly. *'Dot, dash dash dot, dash dash dot, dash dash dash.'* Mike always knew what she liked, and she loved the code.

Mike sneaked into the room with a box of Eggos. He had begged his mom to keep a box in the refrigerator at all times. Apparently, he had become a massive fan of Eggos since Will went missing last year. He also had to endure immense pain and suffering, like actually having to eat all the Eggos before they expired. *'They taste like soggy cardboard,'* but he would do anything for Eleven. He sat on the bed opposite El and took out three Eggos from the box. Eleven was curious at the count, will Mike eat two or will she eat two? Maybe they'll each eat one and a half? He placed two Eggos on two plates that he had also managed to sneak from the kitchen and put the third Eggo on top of the box. Then he planted two candles on the cake and lighted them. Eleven kept looking at Mike with utmost concentration. At long last, her dream was coming true.

After Mike was shot by the unknown assassin, Eleven stayed by his side for one week, never leaving even for a moment. By the end of the week, she was pretty much covered with sweat, grime, and fatigue. She didn't go even though Mike repeatedly requested her to take rest. There was a reason for her strange behavior. On a fateful evening, she had placed her hand on Mike's heart and promised, "I'll save you, so you could save me."

She'll keep her promise so Mike could keep his and that's why she didn't leave until Mike was safe. Dustin laughed at the idea. He said it was called a *'Paradox.'* She didn't know what it meant, she only understood that because of that promise she had made, no one could break their pledges individually. Eleven will save Mike so he could save her, who in turn could save him so he could save her, then on

and on. Their promises had neither a beginning nor an end. Her head hurt just thinking about it, but she really liked the idea. Words were strange, but they carried so much emotion.

When she moved back to the cabin, one day Hopper went missing for the entire day. He came back late at night and gave her a gift that she treasured above everything, well, a bit less than Mike. It was a photo of her Mama. Hopper gave her a photo frame made of glass and wood so she could keep the picture safe. She liked the idea a lot as well.

Martin picked up the photo frame that was resting beside the cake. Becky was nearly unconscious now, but she gasped as Martin threw the frame to the floor. The glass shattered, then Martin put his foot on the photo and broke the frame. He bent over and picked up the broken frame in his hands, careful not to let the glass nick him. With a slight twist, he split the structure in two and took out the photo. He held it under the light and smiled. His daughter had grown up. She was wearing a blue dress with pink spots and a pink ribbon at the waist. She also had some make-up on her face. Martin hated all of it. But then he smiled as he noticed her eyes. She looked strong, 'NO,' powerful. He'd do something about that voluminous hair, it's a disadvantage at times. Martin flipped the photo, 'Snowball?'

Hopper showed Eleven a strange looking paper on the night he gave her the photograph. It said Jane Hopper, daughter of Jim Hopper and Teresa Ives. She was curious, why not '*Jane Ives*?' Hopper explained that using the title right now was risky, especially since she would be going to school very soon. People did not know Jane Hopper, but there were too many people in this world who knew a girl named Jane Ives who had never been born. But he confirmed, "You'll always be Jane Ives, El. No one can take that away from you," Hopper ran his fingers through her hair.

Eleven said with confidence, "I'd want to be Jane Hopper Ives," Hopper had never felt so happy as he felt that day. He didn't know what to say. So, he did the only thing possible, he grinned a broad smile through his mustache at Eleven. She smiled and hugged her father.

Hopper was thinking about all the additional headaches that she would have to face in school when suddenly he noticed her eyes. They held a curious gaze; one Hopper would refer to Joyce as *'The calm before the Fucking Typhoon.'* He sighed and glanced at the bookshelf *'Another one then.'* The rate at which he was buying bookshelves was sure to raise uncomfortable questions like 'Hopper, you making a library?' But Hopper didn't mind, if Eleven wanted to break Bookshelves when she was mad then he would ensure that she would get to break bookshelves when she was mad, it was better than the time she had thrown a ten-ton tree at him. And he had the prototype medicine given to him by Dr. Owens, it was designed to reduce hemorrhages in the brain, something that killed her when she closed the gate from hell and pushed Cerberus back into slumber. Now the medicine would save her from her hemorrhages which originated due to power use. If that didn't work then Mike 'Jesus' Wheeler will step in and bring her back from the dead. Hopper mused, *'Breaking a bookshelf or two at times didn't pose such a big threat anymore.'*

"I want to be Jane Eleven Hopper Ives." Eleven decided her name.

Hopper had a sudden recollection of Him filling a form for a criminal whose name had twenty-two letters. He sighed, "Why would you want to use that damn name given to you by that psychopath from the lab?"

"Cause Mike likes that name."

"Damn it, Wheeler!"

"He says I'm pretty!" Eleven was blushing now.

Martin was looking at the photo for quite some time now. The woman came beside him and peeked.

"That her?"

"Yes, meet Eleven."

"She's quite pretty, she's nothing like the photo you had shown me

earlier."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of this. Where she'd be going, she doesn't need to look pretty." Martin knew better than anyone else about what his daughter was, being *'Pretty'* wasn't one of them.

Eleven also noted a date in that paper. Hopper said that it was the day she was born, it was her birthday. She didn't have birthdays before, so she had no idea what it meant. Hopper then sat beside her and explained "Your birthday is the day when all the people who love you come together to have a grand party. They'll come, no matter where they are, or how they are, they'll always come to celebrate the day you were born."

"Mike will come?"

"Oh, he'll come, he'll come for sure," Hopper was studying a piece of rope that rested on the workbench.

And now her dream was finally coming true. Mike came to her birthday because he had loved her. Well, SHE came to him, but Hopper explained that Mike was injured so he couldn't come. She needed to go to him, and so, he had driven her tonight. She didn't mind because she saved Mike that day and she knew the extent of his injuries. With a shudder, she recalled Dr. Owens' voice as he guided her on how to jumpstart hearts and bind arteries using her mind.

Mike was singing *'Happy Birthday'* when Eleven breathed hard on the candles, and they winked out. Mike clapped his hands and flashed a grin at Eleven. She proceeded to grin back. Then Mike handed her a knife, and she pressed it against the cake. She carefully cut a piece and picked it up. Now she remembered what Hopper told her to do, she smiled and held the piece against Mike's mouth.

Martin curved a slice of the cake with surgical precision. He picked the piece up and took a bite, "Good cake, what's the flavor? Hmm, WAFFLES?"

Becky couldn't respond to that question. The bullet that was shot at

her a few minutes ago had ruptured her intestines on its way in and had sent a barrage of blood up to her throat. She was choking on her own blood. She groaned as the man proceeded to enjoy the cake. He looked content.

"I'd like to give you guys a piece, but you're in no condition to take a bite. And I'm sure Teresa won't mind," Martin licked his fingers as he finished the slice.

Mike held a slice of cake to Eleven's mouth, she swallowed the whole article in one go and nearly choked. Mike laughed as he ran his hand over her back. Eleven glared back at him but laughed once she saw his face. Mike then brought out another plate and placed a piece of cake on it. Then he put the spare Eggo beside it and looked at the window. Eleven smiled and nodded as the plate slowly rose in the air and drifted towards the police van parked below the house. It hovered a moment beside the door and then a hand came out and took it. Eleven smiled at the van and turned her eyes back at Mike, who looked like he had witnessed Godzilla itself.

'He's keeping a tab on us.' Mike thought. He wanted to kiss her tonight, it was her birthday after all. He had seen his dad kiss her mom on her birthday. But he was running out of options.

The first option; he could kiss her right here, right now, which would then be followed by Hopper ramming the vehicle through their main gate.

The second option; he could close the window before he kissed her, which would then be followed by Hopper ramming the vehicle through their main gate and then an attempt to drive the car upstairs so that he could ram it through his door.

Mike swallowed and glanced at the window. Eleven probably understood, she smiled at him and then immediately bent forward and kissed him on the lips. It was a short peck, shortest to date, even shorter than the one in the gym. But it carried so much emotion that Mike felt numb. After all this time, after all the hardships, Eleven had finally understood what a kiss meant to both of them. Mike beamed as if it was his last smile in the world. Eleven grinned back, a boy

who believed in the impossible had promised her that he'll save him. As long as it took, as many times it took and as many lives he had to live, he'll always bring her back. Standing at the precipice of a sky shattered by lightning, the boy spoke to her, "Believe in me."

She had believed.

Martin looked at Becky, she was bleeding profusely through the wound. It would still take some time for her to die but not much. She was suffering through agonizing pain as her lungs were slowly getting filled with her own blood. But she struggled to keep eyes open for some reason. She was looking at Teresa with hope in her eyes, she believed that someone would come and save her sister. 'Fools, all of them. Salvation came and left this Earth a long time ago.' Martin believed in something, but magic wasn't one of them. Becky's belief would not save her today because she had chosen the wrong goddess to believe in. He turned his head towards the woman standing beside him, who gave him a curious look, '*Shoot her?*'

Martin sighed, emotional people. "Don't waste bullets."

Mike stood at the window as Eleven got into the car and then the engine started. He was still looking when Hopper peeked outside, turned his head towards Mike and nodded once. Then they drove on.

"Hopper actually likes me, maybe he's not so crazy," Mike felt ecstatic as he pulled the blanket over his body.

'Shit, Hopper took the plate. That crazy bastard.'

4. E1: Justice - Act III

Episode 1: Justice

Act III: The Future

In a sleepy town named Hawkins, Indiana, a girl named Eleven left her soulmate's home after celebrating her birthday. In a city not so far from Hawkins, Indiana, a psychopath named Martin glared at the woman who was looking frustrated now.

"Nothing doc, I checked everywhere. It's not here."

Martin sighed at the amateur, "You haven't looked in the most important place."

"No fuck boss, I checked everywhere. Maybe we shouldn't have shot her."

"No, she's irrelevant."

Brenner crouched in front of the table, "You haven't asked the guardian."

He made a mental note of the words that were coming through Teresa Ives' mouth, "Breathe... Sunflower... Three to the right, four to the left... 450... Rainbow..."

Martin smiled and got up. He had never come second in any exam throughout his entire life. He asked the woman calmly, "Where did you see the Sunflowers?"

"What? They're right on the table." She pointed as if she was explaining something to a blind person.

"Not those. Somewhere else."

"Didn't see anything that looked like a sunflower," the woman said in an irritated voice.

Martin sighed for the umpteenth time and started to climb upstairs.

Suddenly the lamps lining the staircase started flickering, the girl sniffed, "Fucking ghetto." Martin shushed her and looked back at the room, a drop of blood had come out of Terry Ives' nostril. Martin smiled and resumed climbing, *'It doesn't matter, she can't stop fate.'* He reached a room from his past, a room where he had never set foot in his entire life. But he knew every item in that room as if he had made them with his own hand. He clicked the latch and pressed the door, but it didn't budge an inch. He tried again, nothing happened. The lights were still flickering downstairs. He looked at the woman and raised his eyebrows.

"I swear boss, I checked this room and didn't find shit. I left the door open."

Martin growled. "Shoot it."

In response, the woman drew a silenced revolver and shot the latch. It came off, and the door sagged, but it still held. The girl shot the hinges next. The door leaned a bit more but still held to the frame.

"I'll be right back" Martin stormed downstairs leaving the woman behind, who was now looking perplexed. She had never seen magic in her life.

Martin reached downstairs and stood in front of Terry, "A bit of humanity still left, huh? I'm surprised."

Then Martin picked up the flower vase with the sinuous black lines and viciously hit her on the temple. Her head sagged as drops of blood started falling down from her forehead where the flower vase had hit. Martin threw the flower vase on the ground, and it shattered into pieces. Bloodied petals of sunflowers scattered across the room and some of them fell on Becky as she tried her best to take a few agonizing breaths through her choked-up throat. The lights along the staircase stopped flickering and came back to a steady glow. Upstairs, the door finally gave away and bent halfway into the room. In a moment Martin reached there and kicked the door.

A door made of wood burst into a shower of splinters as a man with white hair and black suit entered the room from his past to reclaim his future. The world moves one step closer to Armageddon as the

first prophecy is fulfilled.

Martin studied the items in the room. It was apparently a child's room. There was a cot made for a small child, and it was adorned with toys. Martin's eyes flashed around the room and then fixated on a poster of a scenery somewhere in the Bahamas. It showed a beautiful blue sky laid over a gorgeous green sea, a golden slice of beach ran through the base of the posture. A rainbow arched along the skyline. It was a majestic picture. He remembered an interview he had with Teresa, once her daughter was born she wanted to go to the Bahamas for a vacation. Martin had told her that once the tests were over, he would pay for the holiday from his own pocket. He had assured her that she deserved it. It was surprising that she didn't go to the Bahamas, even after he had made the payment.

He squinted his eyes and looked at the boat that was floating in the green sea in that poster, there was a name written on it in a funny looking font. The title said '*Mirasol*.' Martin moved to the poster, tore it down and tapped the wall behind it. Then he nodded and punched through the wall as if it was made of cardboard. His hand went inside, and he ripped out a portion of the wall to reveal a hole, it contained a small metal box with a combination lock. The woman gasped as he turned the dial as per the instructions he had received earlier, and gently opened the door. She kept staring at Martin as he put his hands inside and brought out the item that was rightfully his. He held the object to the light as if he was looking at a treasure. The article didn't show any damage at all. He smiled at the woman who was looking much relieved now.

Martin and the woman came downstairs and carefully observed the room. Becky was lying in a pool of blood and she was probably dead, or she was hoping that she was. Terry was still sitting on the chair where Martin had left her. Her head still sagged, and there was a deep pool of blood on the ground right below where her head was hanging. He took one last glance at Teresa but didn't feel even a tinge of guilt. She had died a decade back, and the soul needed to pass on. Then he saluted the motionless heap lying on the floor, "Goodbye, Rebecca, you tried your best."

He put the item in a secure pocket inside his suit and nodded to the woman. The woman nodded back and went into the kitchen. She

turned the gas on and went to the other end to find something. She was going through the drawers one by one when suddenly her eyes fell on a pair of candles lying on the floor. They looked like Birthday candles and resembled rainbows that glittered under the light. She smirked and placed both carefully on the counter. Then she assessed the room properly. All the windows were closed, and there was little ventilation. The windows and doors throughout the house were also locked. She took out a matchbox and lit the candles. One and Four started to slowly melt away as the wicks came to life.

Becky was at the edge of consciousness when she heard the sound of the door closing, *'they are finally gone.'* She was not feeling the pain anymore; her entire body had become numb. She tried to focus her eyes to see her sister, but her vision was already fading away. She thought about that day. Today was the birthday of her niece, Jane Ives, a girl who could do magic and called herself Eleven. Becky had waited for this day for fourteen years, hoping that one day the girl will come back and absolve her mother.

More than a decade back, her sister Teresa *'Terry'* Ives had become pregnant with a daughter. She didn't have a husband at that time, so she found refuge with Becky. They were struggling to make ends meet. Becky was doing some small-time job that didn't pay well, and Teresa was without a job at that time. With the imminent childbirth, she was also suffering from health issues. Becky didn't mind the presence of her sister, she loved her from the bottom of her heart. They were determined to go through the ordeal at any cost.

Then one day the impossible happened. Becky came home early and saw her sister jumping around the house.

"Uhhm, you okay?"

"Yes yes, I'm fine. I got a job."

Becky smiled at her sister's happiness. They needed the money. No, Terry needed the money for herself. She was suffering from health issues due to her pregnancy, and she needed medical care as well as good food.

"What kind of job?"

"It's in a lab called Hawkins National Laboratories, in Hawkins. Right next door."

"You got a job in a lab?" Becky was surprised.

"Yeah, they said they'd want to run some tests on me...."

"Are you out of your damn mind?"

"No no, it's okay. They said that they'll not harm the baby. I'll just have to go swimming from time to time. They said swimming is good for babies, it develops their mind." Terry flashed a triumphant smile. Her baby would grow up to become smart, "My baby would be a doctor someday."

Becky nodded cautiously, she didn't like that condition, but they needed the money. The scientists from the labs also visited her to explain the process. Dr. Martin Brenner claimed that Terry's pregnancy was causing damage to her body in some unknown way, that's why she was having a lot of health issues. Something was wrong with the child and they needed to run some simple tests and then they would recommend some treatments. Whether Terry will go for the treatment or not will depend on both her and Becky's decision. If they agreed, the lab would also pay for her therapy. Dr. Brenner had assured her.

Then she watched in amazement as Fate struck a swift blow to their lives, it came so fast that they didn't even have a moment to react until it was too late. Terry had a miscarriage and lost the child. A child whose name was decided even before she was born. Terry never forgave herself, she kept searching for the child in the void and ultimately perished as Fate reversed the blade to put it back in its sheath. Becky never forgave herself either.

Fate stole everything from Terry Ives. It robbed her daughter, it took her speech, it stole her smile.

It stole her soul.

Becky always dreamed of seeing the day when Justice arrived and

held Fate accountable for the gruesome act, and Fate would have to apologize and return it all back to her.

'It finally happened,' she smiled through the severe pain and numbness. Her dream finally came true when the chain of the door-latch slipped by itself one day. Jane had come back to her Mother to save her from her fate. And now Becky won't be able to witness the retribution. She won't be able to testify for her sister as she reclaimed her life from her destiny.

Jane couldn't come today, but the policeman said that soon he'll bring her here and once she grew up a bit, she could come here as many times as she chooses. But Becky couldn't wait that long, she was already making plans to sell her house and then move to Hawkins with her sister. She could get a job there, and Terry could have her daughter back. Finally, after fourteen agonizing years, Teresa Ives, Becky Ives, and Jane Ives would become a family again, just like how she always imagines it to be.

Part of that dream could still come true, provided that Martin had not shot her sister. But someone else would have to take her to Hawkins. Because Becky Ives won't be there when the sun would rise in the sky the next time. *'Can the policeman do it? Can he take her to her daughter?'*

Before losing consciousness forever, a strange thought came to Becky's mind and shocked her. She remembered a particular night from her past which had nothing to do what was happening at that moment. Or maybe it did.

Terry was five months pregnant at that time. She still went to Hawkins for medical tests often but never told her the details. The only thing that mattered was that she would bring money that both of them needed desperately to survive. One day Terry came back with a gigantic smile on her face. Becky had no clue what had happened to her, but she liked that her sister was smiling. She also noticed that Terry was trying to hide something behind her just like when she used to hide waffles when she was a child.

"What? Found a magic lamp?"

"Better. Today after the tests I was feeling sick. So, they took me to the hospital."

"How is that good?"

"Well, there I met this couple. Ted Wheeler and his wife, Karen Wheeler. Karen has also been pregnant for a similar time."

"Okay? And?"

"Well, they were very friendly. A very nice couple, they took me to their home."

"And that made you happy?"

"No no, so we were discussing random stuff. Karen is so nice, she made waffles for me. She was having a debate with her husband about baby names."

"And you had to barge in. I'm not complaining. But shouldn't you consider discussing things like these with your sister?" Becky said in a mocking tone. She realized what the good news was, but she liked the fact that her sister was smiling. It must have felt nice to make new friends after such a long time. Good times were coming.

"I'm sorry. They were so nice." Terry puffed her lips.

"Okay, okay, so what's the name?" Becky smiled, she had not seen her sister this happy since forever.

"Yeah, after a lot of debate we decided that it wasn't going anywhere. So, we decided to name each other's kids."

Terry stopped for a brief moment to feel the item she was hiding behind her, "I named their kid, and they named mine. Ted had to agree to that condition." Terry laughed.

"They gave me this gift to celebrate the names," she handed Becky a flower vase with a sinuous black line wrapped around its base. Becky turned it over, it had four words inscribed at its bottom.

Michael Wheeler.

Jane Ives.

"Mike and Jane?" Becky was mildly amused.

Terry flashed a smile and nodded, "Jane Ives and Michael Wheeler."

"Nice names," Becky smiled as she placed the flower vase on the table, she liked the name, in fact, both of them.

"Yeah, and since they were named together, maybe someday they'll become good friends." Terry flashed a wide grin.

"Jane Ives, Jane Eleven Ives, her name was written in the stars even before she was born. I like that name. I'm sorry Teresa, please forgive me," Becky closed her eyes.

A few minutes after Becky surrendered to fate, in a cabin near the indistinct town named Hawkins, Indiana, Eleven entered her room with a huge grin plastered on her face. She was feeling so happy tonight. Mike came and celebrated her birthday. More friends would have been lovely, but she wasn't complaining. In fact, Mike was the only one who she desperately wanted to celebrate her birthday with. Tomorrow she will give Mike the surprise of his life. Then she walked to the window to close it and gasped as her eyes fell on the floor. The photo frame which she kept on the bed had fallen on the floor. She picked it up and grimaced as she noticed a crack in the glass. It was her fault, she should've closed the window before leaving. She carefully wiped the smudges from the glass and placed it beside her pillow. She'd have Hopper change the glass tomorrow. She went to sleep with a smile on her face. Terry Ives kept smiling through the cracked glass.

Epilogue

Somewhere in the state of Indiana, the fire department was woken up at night by multiple frantic telephone calls. The chief pressed the alarm button and ran to the eleventh fire-engine, they needed their biggest gun for this. They had a tough night ahead of them, somewhere in the sleepy suburbs a gas explosion had blown up a

house, and then the flames proceeded to burn it to the ground. The eleventh fire-engine screamed through the night to save a home which was already consumed by fate.

Somewhere in the state of Indiana, an old shopkeeper placed a broken clock on the table. The technician took out a screwdriver and proceeded to work on it. Before the technician turned the clock over, the shopkeeper noticed that the hands had moved. He was perplexed, now the hour hand rested at 11 and minutes hand rested at 12, 11:00. He also noticed that unlike before, the minute hand twitched as if it wanted to help the hour hand run away from 11. He scratched his head a few times, even a moment ago when he had laid it on the counter it showed 10.59 and the arms were not moving. He thought hard about it and let it go.

Somewhere in the state of Indiana, a florist received a large parcel from the mailman. He thanked the mailman and proceeded to open the package. He used a crowbar to rip apart the wooden casing and cursed loudly. There was an intricately designed statue placed inside the box, one that he had seen nearly a year ago in a curio shop and instantly fell in love with it. It took him a long time to save enough money to buy it, but the statue was damaged during transport. It was a strange statue, a woman stood on a pedestal with her left arm raised towards the sky. Intricately designed clothes made of burnt clay flowed around her, there was a blindfold that covered her eyes. Beneath her feet lied a broken weigh scale that was initially supposed to be attached to the raised arm. The florist then looked at her right arm and sighed a breath of relief. Her right arm was still intact, and it held a long double-edged sword. The florist looked at the pedestal, the inscription read, 'Justice.'

Somewhere in the state of Indiana, a man with white hair and black suit was carefully assessing the object that he had retrieved some time back. It brought old memories, unlike the events from sometime back, these were good ones. He smiled absently as he placed it on the table and took out a magnifying glass. He made a mental note of making some small repairs when he would get some free time. A woman got off the phone and came to him in a slow, calculated walk.

"We're ready to execute, Boss."

The old man raised his arms to the sky as his voice roared in the wind, "In a place far away from the reach of mortal men, in a place where an army waited patiently, a horn sounded to declare the beginning of Armageddon, the end of all creation."

The saga continues in Armageddon Episode 2: Gravity.

5. E2: Gravity - Act I

Summary: *Eleven goes to school, and Mike falls in love with the girl who could do magic, all over again. Jim Hopper confronts his past to save his daughter's future, and Murray Bauman recruits new interns to complete his most significant work. In the meantime, the world slowly starts turning upside-down as Joyce sets the stage for the most fabulous birthday party ever. In the world of Stranger Things, the twin hounds of Justice were unleashed at last. They would hunt Martin Brenner until the end of time.*

A/N: *Scenthounds are a type of hound that primarily hunts by scent rather than sight.*

Prologue:

It was a quiet night in a suburb somewhere in the state of Indiana, USA. A woman was briskly walking down a pavement with her dog. She was enjoying the late-night walk. The weather was beautiful, and there were no thieves or murderers around. She thought *'Maybe America isn't so crazy as my cousins think.'*

She was about to turn a corner when suddenly a car burst through the garbage bins lining the sidewalk and came straight for her.

She had only seen driving like that in the movies, the front tires were turned away from the bend, and the rear tires were spewing blue smoke as the rubber burnt from friction. The car screamed through the curve and at the last moment, the woman managed to dive towards her left. She heard the engine roar to life as the driver released the brake and pressed the gas, then the car was gone in a flash. The woman got up a moment later and saw her dog standing right next to her, wagging its tail. She cursed in Spanish, "Americans are actually crazy. Who drives like this at 10.50PM?"

She quickly turned around to return home.

The car ran three red lights back to back, exited the interstate and nearly crashed into a sedan that was about to enter the highway. The driver of the vehicle lowered his window and cursed loudly, "Fucking assholes!"

The other car kept accelerating through the narrow lane like a chariot driven by the horses of the apocalypse. The driver in the sedan kept muttering expletives as a V8 growl faded into the background noise.

Episode 2: Gravity

Act I: The Scenthound

Mike Wheeler was a boy who didn't believe in luck. He made that decision while lying in a classroom where the lights flickered, and an impossible nightmare kept rolling sixes one after another. On that fateful night, Mike had decided that luck was an excuse for people who had allowed fate to control their destiny. Because if luck really existed, then Mike Wheeler was the unluckiest bastard alive. He would instead take chances battling his fate.

But a lifetime later, while riding on his mom's car on the way to school, Mike couldn't shake off the feeling that he might have been too hasty while making that decision. Last night, Eleven, the telekinetic girl with the 'Poofy' hair and fluffy cheeks, had sneaked into his room to celebrate her first birthday and her father, Jim Hopper was the one who had orchestrated the entire event. Mike was sure that he hadn't done anything special to deserve that moment, maybe Luck was real after all.

Murray Bauman was a man with a mission. His mission was to fuck his liver up before it could throw in the towel. He got up from the sofa and painfully made his way towards the liquor cabinet. He arched his back once he reached there and then gently opened the doors as if he was a grown-up opening Christmas present. He took out a bottle full of transparent and toxic liquid. *'Pure fuel,'* he took out a glass and poured a peg, thought about all the pain and suffering in the world and then added some more. His liver was feeling good today, *'Not on my watch, you won't.'* He was making his way back to his den when suddenly there was a loud bang on his door. Murray took a long sip from his glass and glared at the door, 'What good is a fucking door if people come and knock on it? Closed door means leave the inhabitant the fuck alone.' The banging continued, and

Murray gulped the content of the entire glass in one go. The liquid burnt through his stomach and waged war against his liver. Murray went to the door, yanked it open and cursed loudly, "Fuck me sideways, not YOU again."

He looked in awe at the sight in front of him as if Santa Clause had come down himself to deliver his presents during Christmas. Then he lifted the bottle to his mouth and took a long drag. '*Vodka*,' he needed a lot of that shit to deal with this other shit that was standing at his door at 10 AM in the morning. '*Who the fuck visits people at 10 AM?*' But just like shit stuck to the bottom of the shoe, this one also didn't go away. He sighed and held the gate open as a couple walked into his man-cave. He slammed the door and started following them as they walked into his home with confidence that he had not seen earlier. He admitted to himself with a grudge that he liked the pair. '*Pull-out*,' he smirked as he remembered his last conversation with them. Nancy Wheeler came to a stop in the middle of the room and took out a folder from her bag. She slowly turned towards Murray, opened the folder and handed it over to him. Murray suddenly felt a tremendous craving for Battery Acid. The folder contained a picture of an article that was published a lifetime ago.

'Monsters amongst us – Part 1.' The second part was never published. Murray threw the bottle towards the door with maximum force.

Karen drove the car towards the entrance of Hawkins Middle School and gently stopped it near the path leading to the gate. Mike got down from the car and kissed his mother. Then she ran her hand through his hair and smiled, "There's a plate missing from the kitchen. Now, if it's not in back in its place by tonight, you'll have to eat one extra plate of peas. Understand?"

She smiled like the devil and drove the car away. Mike wasn't surprised at all. His mother was actually an omnipotent Jedi master with an uncanny ability to read minds. His fate was sealed the moment Hopper drove away with the plate, '*Probably laughing like a maniac all the way. Crazy bastard!*'

Then as he turned back to climb the stairs, a flashbulb suddenly fired in front of his eyes and blinded him. A millionth of a moment later,

Mike painfully opened his eyes and found himself standing inside a small room with orange floor and ceilings. The walls were made of something that disrupted his peripheral vision. Mike had a sinking feeling inside his stomach. This was a fragment of Eleven's memory, and in all probabilities, it was a nightmare.

When Mike stood ground against death and absorbed Eleven's memories in the field of the fireflies to save her, he literally lived all thirteen years of Eleven's life in a fraction of a moment. His mind couldn't handle that massive overload of information, so it locked them someplace far away from his conscious mind. Sometimes these memories would get triggered and proceeded to show him a moment of Eleven's past. He was in one of them now and wanted to get the fuck out, some memories were too terrifying to witness. Then he turned his head to observe the room and immediately jumped back a few feet.

A small girl was sitting in one corner and crying by herself. Mike glanced at her and felt an immense sorrow inside his chest, he didn't know why but he sensed that the girl needed him. He made his way to the girl and bent over to get a good look, then he nearly lost his balance. The girl had big soulful eyes and a scared look on her face. *'Eleven?'* Mike gasped, but then he looked at her hair and breathed a sigh of relief. The girl had a shaved head, but a tinge of golden shadow was clearly visible, *'a blonde.'* Mike stood up and looked around the room. He had no idea about this memory, if this was Eleven's then it made no sense, he had never seen a memory with another girl before. Then he looked at the girl, and something rattled his heart. The girl was scared and was crying. Mike promised Eleven that he would never let her cry as long as he was alive, and this girl was another Eleven, waiting to be rescued. Mike sat beside her and gently placed a hand on her shoulder, "Hi, I'm Mike. I'm your friend."

In response, the girl looked at him and stared into his eyes. Mike's heart wrenched at the way her eyes fluttered, *'she is as scared as a deer in headlights.'* She parted her lips to reply but immediately jerked her head towards the front as the door opened. A woman with golden hairs and wearing a black suit walked in and closed the door. With a shock, Mike realized that he had seen the woman before. Last year, this woman had tried to capture Eleven in the school but ended up

getting her brain blown out in the process. She spoke in a calm and soothing voice, "It's time to go sweetheart."

The girl didn't reply, she just kept staring at that woman as if she didn't understand or believe what she was hearing. The woman came close and gently lifted her in her arms. The girl buried her face in that woman's chest and started crying, "Mama! Please, no more tests." The woman just kept consoling her, "It'll be alright dear. Your Mama's here! Shhh!"

'Eleven called Martin Brenner Papa!' Mike remembered the lie.

He jumped up and ran towards them, "YOU'RE NOT HER MOTHER!"

But he was stopped by an invisible shield. It was just a memory, and the events had already been recorded in time. Mike followed the woman as she left the room. He went to the door and stopped, the world was blurred beyond the edge of the memory fragment. Mike turned toward the open door and saw a panel made of metal that read '013'. He squinted his eyes and saw the reflection of the woman on the panel. She was standing in front of a man. The reflection didn't carry enough details, but Mike noticed a head full of white hair and a dark tuxedo. *'Martin Brenner,'* He gritted his teeth, but before he could move ahead, the flashbulb fired again.

Mike took a moment to compose himself, then looked at his watch and breathed a sigh of relief. Unlike Will's real-time visions, these would play within a few seconds. They were memories after all, *'Eleven's memories and my nightmares.'* He didn't want these memories any more than Eleven did but he needed to see them. There was a moment in Eleven's past during which an Angel was somehow transformed into the Devil. Mike needed to witness that moment if he was to stop the decadence once and for all. He would endure the horrors, *'anything to save her.'* He bowed his head and made his way to the classroom.

He found his friends in their respective seats and grinning at him as he entered the class. They were happy to see Mike in school after a long time. He moved towards his table and groaned, Max had skipped class and Jeffry occupied her place. That guy was an absolute asshole. But Mike didn't pay much attention to Jeffry, his favorite

teacher was on his way to the class.

Mike had always liked Mr. Clarke's lectures. The man was a gifted orator, and he had a way of spinning magnificent stories out of mundane subjects that caught the attention of even the most bored students. Mike was looking forward to his lecture, it had been too long since he was out of school. Mr. Clarke entered the class and smiled at his favorite student, "Mr. Wheeler! Good to have you back. How are we doing today?"

"Pretty good sir, pretty good."

"Great. Let's start. But before we begin, I have a surprise for everyone."

Mike perked up, what was so unusual that Mr. Clarke needed to mention it? Mike hated surprises. And why was Will looking at him as if a gigantic hammer was about to fall on Mike?

"Dustin, drumroll please."

Dustin proceeded to slap the bench in front of him in a completely uninterested manner. He was getting tired of this drummer shit.

"Class, we have... MIKE! ARE YOU OKAY?"

Joyce was gently humming a tune while cleaning the kitchen. It was getting late, but she needed to finish preparations for the big event tomorrow. She glanced at the clock that was ticking towards the infinity, '01:55 AM.' Suddenly there was a mild noise that came from the back door. Joyce felt her mouth becoming dry. Will was sleeping in the next room, and Jonathan was out of town for some assignment. She thought about the axe, but it was lying in the storage shack. Suddenly she heard a familiar knock, one that she had heard many times back in her college days. She ran towards the door and yanked it open.

"Hopper?"

"Thank God, you're home! I need your help." The man looked horrified.

"Okay?" Joyce breathed a sigh of relief, *'not a monster, neither the end of the earth.'*

"Joyce, please help me. It's about Eleven."

"What?"

"She is going to school tomorrow, and I don't have a fucking clue what she needs. Please, you gotta help me." Hopper looked like a man who was facing a firing squad.

Joyce laughed and covered her mouth, "What did you get her?"

"A bag, a copy and a pencil."

Joyce kept laughing, "That's all? You know it's not the fifties, right?"

"I know. But it's late, and all the stores are closed. Can we do a Midnight Raid?" There was mischief in Hopper's eyes.

"Just like old times, Jim?"

"Just like old times, Joyce."

They left the house in Hopper's van. Joyce wasn't confident about leaving Will all by himself, so She brought him along for the ride. They reached the store in some time, and Hopper parked the car near the back entrance. They got off the car and started walking towards the gate.

Hopper looked at Will and asked, "How are you holding up kid?"

"Good, pretty good. Mike's coming to school tomorrow."

"Yeah, I know. Listen, Eleven is also going to school tomorrow."

Will stopped in his tracks as his eyes widened and then a big grin appeared on his face.

Hopper sighed, "I know. But don't tell Mike. Eleven wants to give him a surprise."

Will was still laughing, "I Won't. I want to see his face."

They reached the back gate and Hopper took out a small metal rod from his jacket. His eyes twinkled with expectation as he turned towards Joyce, 'Midnight raid.' She rolled her eyes and opened the gate with a key and went inside. Hopper sighed and put the mini-crowbar away. Once inside, Joyce took a flashlight from an aisle and pointed it towards the ground, "Don't turn on the lights. Don't flash the torch towards the windows. They could call the police."

"I am the police," Hopper was confused but then he laughed. A lifetime ago Hopper and Joyce had broken into this very store to steal some scotch. They ended up spending the rest of the night in the police station with a massive hangover.

They spent the next fifteen minutes finding various items that a young girl might need to survive school. Hopper crouched beside Joyce who was trying to find some chocolates, and whispered, "Thanks for the cake."

"How did it go?"

"I have no clue. I spent the better part of the hour donating blood to some mosquitos in my van. Eleven did come back with a massive grin on her face."

"You didn't spy on them?"

"I swear. And what would they do? Host a candlelight dinner with Eggos and Cakes?"

Joyce smiled as she took out a box of chocolates, *'Jim was beginning to trust the bond between Mike and Eleven.'*

Hopper was muttering to himself, "It was a small kiss. Just a cute little peck. ON THE LIPS!"

Joyce spoke quietly, "I've finished the arrangements. Bring her to my place by Seven PM."

"Who did you invite?"

"Everyone who loves her. I've already informed the parents. The kids will be spending the night at my place." Joyce was really excited. It

was her daughter's birthday after all. She'll make it a grand one.

Suddenly there was a loud crash at the back where Will had gone to find some crayons. Before Joyce could jump, Hopper ran towards the sound with a gun in his hand. Joyce reached a moment later and saw a pile of notebooks scattered on the floor. A small hand was visible under the rubble, and it was trying its best to get the owner out of the mess. Joyce breathed a sigh of relief and Hopper went ahead to help. Once the notebooks were put back in place, Hopper pointed towards the exit, "I think we better go now. We have what we need. And here's the cash."

Joyce pushed Hopper's hand away, "You remember what you asked me the night of the Snowball? Don't you dare, Jim. Today's her birthday."

Hopper gave up and put the cash into the donation box for the disabled. Just before leaving, Joyce picked up an elongated box from an aisle and handed it over to Hopper, "Have her wear this tomorrow. Let's not take any chances."

Once Joyce locked the gate, they turned around and started walking towards the van. The streetlights were not working, and the moon was covered by the clouds. It was pitch dark outside. Hopper brought out the flashlight to light the path ahead of them, *'Maybe the lab really made electricity.'*

He was doing most of the talking, "Thanks for the help, Joyce. I was packing her bag when I realized I fucked up big time. I am an idiot."

"It's okay, good thing that you came to me. How's Mike?"

"Doing better, the kid's a fighter."

"That he is Jim, that he is."

"I just wish they could lead a normal.... WHAT THE FUCK?"

Hopper was moving the flashlight around as they were walking towards his van. The light swept a broad arc across the car and in that fraction of illumination, they saw something crouching on top of the hood. It looked like a severely deformed man. It had a long tail

and a dark flesh covered body that was way out of proportion to be a human or any animal they had ever seen. It was looking at the windshield with a face that vaguely resembled a snout. Hopper quickly swept the flashlight back towards the hood, but the abomination was gone. The light reflected on an afterimage that glowed for a moment and then faded away. Hopper had already taken out his gun and was holding it pointed towards the van. Joyce was clutching on to Will with one hand and holding on to Hopper's arm with the other. Her face had already turned white, *'Not this again.'*

Hopper whispered through his teeth, "Did you all see that?"

"Ye.... Yes."

"What the hell was that? Will?"

"I.... I don't know. Didn't look like anything from before." The strain was evident in his shaking voice.

The streetlights were still not working, and the moon showed no sign of coming out of hiding. They reached the van one step at a time, then climbed aboard. Hopper turned the key and stepped on the gas, *'I need a bigger gun.'*

Murray Bauman was sitting on the sofa with a distant expression on his face. He was trying to find memories that were hiding somewhere deep inside his soul. He never wanted to bring them up until he was ready, but that day never came. He looked at Nancy and spoke with a sad voice, "Where did you get this picture?"

In response, Nancy snatched the bottle away from Murray's hand, took a long sip and choked immediately. *'Battery acid?'* She almost threw up.

On the night of the Snowball, Nancy was returning home with Jonathan while Mike was riding back on his bicycle. Nancy was feeling really happy. She didn't lie to Dustin, she really liked him the best amongst her brother's friends. Jonathan dropped Nancy at her house around midnight, but Mike never reached home. He had

crashed his bicycle into a car which severely injured him and nearly ended his life. Somehow Hopper and Eleven found Mike lying in the street, promptly brought him to the hospital and saved his life. Others did not have a problem believing the story, but Nancy wasn't born yesterday. Back in the hospital when everyone was trying to comfort Mike as he came to his senses, Nancy was looking at Dr. Owens. He had just winked at Mike before leaving the room. Nancy had a suspicious feeling, but before she could follow him, Eleven left her chair and started moving away from the bed. But then Mike thrust his arm out, caught Eleven's arm and held it in a grip that indicated an absurd idea. Mike was more concerned about Eleven than she was about him. Nancy glanced at the door and walked out to find the man who owed her an explanation.

Nancy found Dr. Owens and Hopper sitting on a bench and whispering quietly. Dr. Owens was messaging his throat as if something was choking him a moment ago. Nancy observed the expression on both of their faces and knew that something was wrong, and it involved the young couple who were trying to find solace in each other arms back in that room. She went to the pair and spoke casually, "Hey, Hopper. Thanks for saving my brother last night."

"Don't mention it kid, it's my duty."

"Regarding your duty, where did you find him exactly?"

Hopper let out a sigh, "Near the fourth."

"Hmm, Mike takes that route sometimes. But your house is the other way, right?"

Hopper suddenly looked at Nancy, and she saw a shadow flickering in his eyes, *'doubt.'*

"Eleven wanted to see him."

"Aww, you're such a caring father!"

Hopper wasn't amused, "You got a point kid?"

"Nope, just saying thanks. By the way, you said Mike suffered from a

car crash, right?"

"Yeah" Hopper sighed, 'the girl's smart.'

"Mike needed a lot of blood. Must be some injury."

Hopper stared at Dr. Owens, but he was looking just as helpless as he was, *I should have choked him to death.'*

"Yet he was in the OT for a short time. I checked the logs." Nancy looked at Dr. Owens with a stare that could have melt steel.

There were two ways of bleeding out, either through an external injury or through an internal one. Car crashes may result in severe trauma, but an injury that required so much blood to recover would end up putting the patient in the OT for a long time. Mike was in the OT only for a while as if his wounds had already been healed before he was brought to the hospital. The surgeon just cleaned and bandaged the almost healed wound and then placed the patient on the bed. Then blood packs were used to refill the patient's body with the much-needed blood. It must have been magic, and Nancy knew a magician who was sitting right beside Mike at the moment.

Dr. Owens shrugged and looked at Hopper who nodded and asked Nancy to sit down. Then he proceeded to tell Nancy a story that came straight out of a thriller novel mixed with science fiction and sprinkled with a tinge of horror. A year back, Nancy would have rolled her eyes, but this time she listened with attention. Once Hopper was done speaking, he looked at the ground and spoke in an apologetic tone, "I really wish I could do something. But right now, I have no clue where that fox is hiding. It'd be best if you could somehow convince your mother to take Mike away for some time. Maybe to a vacation at a faraway place. The further he moves away from Eleven the better for him."

Nancy nodded absently because she knew it would be impossible to separate them and they needed each other more than ever. She also knew that Hopper would be of no help, he would place Eleven's safety above Mike's. Any father would do that, but Nancy knew a journalist who was a bit too interested in a lab situated in a sleepy town named Hawkins, Indiana. She went to the library, got pictures

of all the articles about the monster and came straight to Bauman the next day.

Murray listened to Nancy's story and emptied half of the bottle of water that he had somehow retrieved from the back of the sofa. It all made sense, but he wished it didn't. If there was one man in this world who would never go to hell, it was Martin Brenner. *'The man was already living in one.'*

"Why did you come to me?"

"Because you were awfully interested in the lab for it to be a simple coincidence."

'The girl's intelligent. She'd be a great journalist one day. If she lives past this year,' Martin grimaced at the thought. He held the bottle to his mouth and emptied the remaining half in one go. Nancy and Jonathan were surprised to see Murray drinking water for a change, but in another life, Murray Bauman was a teetotaler. He also had a head full of jet black hair and didn't allow his beard to grow beyond a French-cut.

Over a lifetime ago, somewhere in a city that never sleeps, a brilliant journalist named Michael Brown was standing on the pavement and smoking a Havana. The weather was pleasant, and a slight breeze snaked through the cold concrete jungle and made him shiver. He was casually observing the street when a yellow cab stopped in front of him. A song was playing loudly inside the cab. Michael remembered the lyrics, *'Killing me softly with his song'* by Roberta Flak. The song was released sometime back and hit the Billboard bulls-eye. It would play in the radios all day long. Michael also knew a girl who liked the song. He flashed a wide grin and went to the car as a tall girl climbed out and hugged him, "And how's my Journalist doing today?"

Michael laughed, "Just saving the world."

"Really?"

"Yup. Fit the final piece of the puzzle today. The article goes live

tomorrow."

The girl smiled at him, she really liked the man who would go to any length to find the truth. She waved at a couple who were moving away from them. A small child peeked from her mother's shoulder and flashed a toothless smile at her. She laughed as the child proceeded to make a funny face, "You really got that bastard for good."

Michael just nodded, "Martin Brenner would never see the sun as long as he's alive. Just wait for tomorrow's front page."

The girl looked at him with a dark expression, "He doesn't deserve to live."

Martin hardened his jaw and spoke with determination, "Don't worry Lisa. I know everything about him now. He won't be able to hide from justice anymore."

But he was wrong, Martin did not hide from Justice. It was the other way around.

6. E2: Gravity - Act II

A/N: Sighthounds are breeds of hunting dogs that primarily hunt by sight and speed.

Episode 2: Gravity

Act II: The Sighthound

"Mike! You okay?" Mr. Clarke sounded alarmed.

Mike couldn't answer because he had just managed to fall from his seat. He was then succeeded by Lucas who looked like as if he had seen a ghost. Dustin kept slapping the table and frankly, he was giving an encore. Will was laughing like a maniac.

Eleven had just walked into the class, and she looked absolutely gorgeous. Mike had seen different versions of Eleven in the past, the one with the buzzcut hair and boyish face, the one with the black eyeshadow and pulled back hair, the one with the 'Poofy' hair and fluffy cheeks, the one with the devil may care look and murderous intent, but she had never looked so beautiful as she was looking today. She wore a white shirt and blue jeans, and her hair was neatly tucked behind her ears with a hairband. She had no makeup but still looked stupendous, but the most distinguishing feature was a bright red spectacle that covered her eyes. Two streaks of red bars emerged from corners of the frame and vanished behind her pointy ears to make her face appear angular and graceful. Mike fell in love with the girl who could do the impossible, all over again, and then he merely fell from his seat.

He got up and twisted his face. Mr. Clarke eyed him suspiciously and introduced Eleven as the niece of Hopper. Her name was Jane Hopper, and she would be studying with them for some time.

Jeffrey was staring at the new girl as if she was his favorite ice cream. She was cute and looked nothing like the other girls in the class. She carried a certain sense of authority as if she knew that she could beat the shit out of every student, all at once. Not to mention her eyes that somehow mimicked the bottomless depths of a lake. But

at the same time, there was a subtle feminine touch that pointed towards a soft and compassionate soul.

'She is just damn pretty.' Jeffry really liked her.

He flashed a wide beam at the new girl. He was confident that she could not escape the charm of Jeffry Sullivan, the guy who had taken Clara, the reigning beauty queen, to Snowball last year. But in a moment Jeffry sighed as he noticed that she was looking and smiling nervously at Mike Wheeler for some god damn reason. *'Must be freaked out by that alien.'* He shouldn't have sat beside that loser today, *'Dude's unlucky as a mirror broken by a black cat.'*

But to his delight, the girl got down from the pedestal and slowly walked towards him calmly and confidently. Jeffry flashed a wide grin, *'Still got it.'* The girl came to him, stopped for a moment and then gently spoke, "Get out."

Mike fell from his chair again as Lucas buried his face in his hand. Dustin kept doing the drumroll, but now it sounded like the Apache war drums, and Will was pressing his hands against his mouth to control the laughter. Jeffry kept looking at the girl with sheer curiosity and then suddenly felt a pressure in his lower abdomen. *'Shit,'* he got up to run away to the washroom. Eleven sat down on the chair and flashed a smile, "Good morning, Mike."

Mike could only stare in awe and didn't notice that the entire classroom was staring at him as if was a hero that had come alive from the legends. Mike didn't give a shit, he had enough problems in his mind. Eleven was a beautiful girl, and the entire class had every right to ogle her. That wasn't a problem. When it came to Eleven, Mike was so far ahead in the race that the competition wasn't even visible. The problem was that Eleven still didn't possess the necessary aptitude to function in human society. Mike was terrified about the prospective outcomes, but then the image of a small child flashed in his mind. He hardened his jaw. He'll guide her through this shit, or get expelled from the school in the process, *'whatever it takes.'*

It was way past midnight when a light came to life in a cabin somewhere in the woods. Hopper moved his finger away from the

switchboard and carefully assessed his surroundings. Eleven was fast asleep in her room, probably exhausted after spending an exciting hour with Mike. Tomorrow she would go to school and enter the next phase of her life. Hopper finally felt like growing old. He placed the package on the table and carefully made his way to a corner of the room. His past was buried down there, and it was finally time to visit them. The upside down or '*whatever it was this time*' had started encroaching into this world again. The monster he saw tonight near the store was nothing like what he or the others had seen before. Hopper tried to imagine the abomination that he had seen only for an instant. It had long arms and legs and a long tail which hinted towards a lithe and fast body. The snout had inch-long fangs, and there were no eyes. But the creature could somehow feel its surrounding because it disappeared a moment after the flashlight streaked by the hood. Hopper needed better weapons. He crouched over a wooden floorboard, inserted a flathead screwdriver in the gap and gently pressed the handle. The floorboard came up in a smooth motion, and a large trap door appeared on the ground. Hopper caught the screwdriver in his teeth and yanked a metal ring that was resting on the edge of the door, it struggled a bit but then gave away to the determination. A man going back to his past was literally unstoppable because he knew his way.

He placed his hands on the edge and then slid the lower part of the body into the hole. Then he let go and fell amongst a bunch of boxes and files with a loud thump, 'I'm getting too domesticated for this shit.' He fumbled to find the flashlight and after a moment clicked a button that gave birth to a small circle of yellow light. He flashed that circle around to find his way and slowly went to the back. He stopped as the ring illuminated something lying on the floor. Hopper bent over and lifted a heavy bag from the floor. He needed a big fucking gun to deal with the shit that was sitting on his van tonight, and he knew just what the doctor prescribed. As he was about to open the chain, his eyes fell on a box lying on the rubble, and suddenly a curtain lifted from his eyes. He dashed to the box, yanked the lid away and took out an old file. It was covered in dust and grime. Hopper opened the file and sat down as his feet gave away, '*It was right in front of my eyes all along.*'

Hopper took out a photograph from the file and held it under the

flashlight. It was a picture that nauseated him even to this day. It was a picture of a small girl. He was the one to have found her body in a ditch near an abandoned warehouse near the docks. The first time he had seen the body he promptly threw up. He was about to do the same today, but his empty stomach saved him. 'The Director' was a curious piece of monstrosity, he would abduct his victims along with their families. Then proceed to murder one spouse in front of another, then kill the other one and then kidnap the child. He would hold the children for a few months and then murdered them as well. The police never found the reason why. But they noticed a strange time lag. 'The Director' would only hold the children between three to five months before murdering them. It didn't make any sense. Hopper grimaced, 'Until today.'

Mike was thinking about the girl who was sitting beside him and devouring the knowledge that was radiating from Mr. Clarke. He was hoping that Mr. Clarke wouldn't remember the cute girl who hated Sweden and didn't speak much. Mr. Clarke turned towards the blackboard and started writing down some puzzles. Suddenly a piece of crumpled paper appeared out of nowhere and headed straight for Mr. Clarke's head. Mike watched in amazement as the paper flew towards Mr. Clarke in a lazy arc and then violently crashed against some invisible shield and went sideways. He gasped and looked at Eleven, her eyes twinkled, and he felt the air getting heavier. Before Mike could catch Eleven's arm, there was a loud crash behind them. Mr. Clarke turned around and saw another one of his students tumbling in the ground.

As soon as the bell rang, Mike jumped up from his seat, went to Eleven and grabbed her hand. Jeffry was trying to return to the classroom to get his bag. But like every time since that morning, he bent over as soon as he entered the class and ran away in haste. His intestines had waged war on him and won't let him leave the washroom. Mike lowered his face and whispered something in Eleven's ear, then she got up and resigned her seat. The jaws of almost every student in the class crashed as Mike Wheeler, the biggest loser in Hawkins high, dashed out of the room with the hot girl in his arms, and she went giggling as if she was his girlfriend. Mike ran with Eleven as the guys followed close behind. They made

their way to the staircase in a breathless run, and after reaching there, Mike hugged Eleven in a tight embrace.

"Dude, I mean seriously. In the school?" Dustin was never fond of couples. Lucas just shrugged. It wasn't so awful, he would've done it. Will winked at Eleven, and she smiled at him.

"Eleven? You came to school?" Mike hated surprises, but this one was turning out to be fantastic.

"Yes."

"I.... You.... The specs?"

"Hopper said that it'll hide my face." Eleven was cheerful. She liked her new specs.

"You look amazing. I love the glasses."

Eleven didn't respond but looked at Mike's shirt, she was already blushing at that point. Then Mike let go of Eleven, and the gang swarmed around her. She kept laughing as the guys hugged her and squeezed her hands. Mike stood back and watched the scene with satisfaction. Eleven needed friends and those three were the best the world had to offer. Dustin was jumping in excitement, "What cool things can you do now? Did you do Jedi mind training while you were gone? Can you read my mind? No, shit, wait."

Lucas objected, "Dude, she is not a toy."

"Can you shoot laser beams from your eyes?" Dustin wasn't ready to give up so quickly.

Eleven just smiled and shook her head sideways. Then she thrust her hand forward. Mike felt the air getting heavier and, in a moment, a set of loud bangs indicated that all the doors of the stairwell had been closed all at once. Eleven rotated her fist, and all the locks turned with a cacophony of clicks. Then she opened her palm and gently lifted it upward. The ground moved away from their feet as all of them floated in the air. Dustin cried out in excitement, "Son of a bitch. We're all flying. WE ARE ACTUALLY FLYING."

Will laughed as Lucas kept trying to turn upside down. Mike smoothly glided upwards. They were still hovering a few feet above the ground, but they didn't feel any weight at all. As if the gravity in that area had been turned off. They were literally having the time of their life. Then someone banged the door above them, and Eleven brought them down slowly.

Dustin started jumping as soon as he landed, "That was so awesome. You can actually make us fly. We can have our own superhero team."

Mike came to Eleven and gently wiped the drop of blood that was dripping down from her nose. She had gotten really powerful over the last year, a power of this level would have resulted in a gush of blood before. The door on top of them opened, and a group of students came inside the stairwell. They look dumbfounded because they had no idea what was holding the door closed until then. Mike grimaced, the power was all good but pushing her beyond a limit could still bring out the doppelganger. He needed to solve the puzzle before time ran out. But for now, her powers have to be limited.

"Okay, we need to talk."

Mike sighed and put his arms on Eleven's shoulders, "You cannot use your powers in the school. People will notice. That's a problem because if they see a basketball hanging above the hoop, they might call the police. If they call the police, Hopper will come. Then he'll put me through the hoop and take you back. He'll never let you back in the school. Do you understand?"

Eleven was listening to Mike with complete attention. The others were feeling a bit nervous now. It had been a lifetime since Mike had scolded Eleven and she had grown up a lot in that time. But then Eleven smiled at Mike, "Okay."

'Dude's a fucking wizard!'

Mike looked at Eleven in the eyes and spoke softly, "Now that you're here, I'll rather be with you as long as possible. So please, for the sake of both of us, do not use your powers, please." Eleven nodded furiously and smiled back at Mike.

The others were already trying to suppress their laughs by that time. *'Look at those two! Yuck!'*

Then suddenly Eleven clutched Mike's hands tightly, and a cold fury started raging in her eyes. A girl with fiery red hair had entered the staircase above them. '

'She had skipped the first half.'

Max came down the stairs and stood in front of the girl who was about to declare war on her, and no one knew why. Mike groaned, today will be a long day. Max didn't flinch in front of the approaching tornado. She was a girl, and she could see the signs that the boys had missed.

She addressed Eleven softly, "It's about Mike, isn't it?"

To the boys' amazement, Eleven nodded, "You want him."

Mike suddenly felt like Steve, two girls were fighting for him in the school, *'Come on Kingdom.'* Then he remembered a man whose jaw was moving sideways on its own and swallowed, *'SHIT.'*

Max thought for a moment and smiled, "You came to school on the day I was riding my skateboard around Mike in the gym."

Mike recalled that day vividly and buried his face in his palm, *'What is this? A cheesy soap opera produced by Fate? The girl manages to run away from prison to find her soulmate. Sees him with another girl who just happened to be hanging around for no good reason. Draws the wrong conclusion and runs away? Even I could write a better script to delay the reunion.'*

Max started laughing heartily, "It was nothing like that. I was just trying to impress him, so he would stop acting weird and accept me in the party. I was never interested in him in that way."

Max placed an arm on Eleven's shoulder, "And you know why he was trying so hard to keep me out? Because he thought I was trying to replace you."

Mike wanted to die from shame if that was possible, *'Dear God, I was*

such an asshole.'

"People often do that when they care so much for each other," Max smiled at Lucas.

"Mike belongs to you, and you belong to him, Eleven. I promise that he's just my friend."

Max had a way of telling the truth, she grinned at Eleven, "You're the only one who's more than his friend."

Eleven looked at Mike with a rush of questions in her eyes. Mike grinned at her and squeezed her shoulder, he only wanted to be with Eleven. She breathed a sigh of relief and held her hand in front of Max, "I'm sorry."

Max clutched her hands tightly and grinned, "Wanna learn how to ride a skateboard?"

Hopper moved his flashlight around the box and found a photo frame. He picked it up and blew away the dust. Then he held it under the torch and smiled, *'Jim Hopper was not always a small-town cop.'* A lifetime ago, Jim Hopper was the name of a vicious greyhound in NYPD. He was smart, he was a war hero, and he was determined. He was like a hound on the trail of its hunt, and he would never let go once he set his sights on the prey. His latest target was a serial killer who was, in all respects, an anomaly. He remembered a session that he attended in Atlanta that was taken by some head honchos from FBI BAU. They had talked about patterns. They said that humans were straightforward complex machines. Humans would often behave in random ways, but to achieve that randomness they would have to follow a pattern. This was especially true for serial killers when a serial killer would go the extra mile to showcase a random behavior, he would have to think hard to follow a strategy to achieve that feat. 'The Director' was a murderer who would kill people at random times at random locations. The police were never able to find a pattern, and they were going batshit insane to discover any little breadcrumb.

Hopper first heard the term coffee and contemplation after joining NYPD. There was a long history behind it. He was going through the

newspaper one day and suddenly noticed a small poster for a theatre that hosted some obscure play which no one watched. He saw a short text that was inscribed below the banner.

'Play timings for this month will be notified once we have received enough interest. Please confirm your slot by calling the following number.'

It was a mundane poster. Theatres like these were on the verge of bankruptcy as the crowd slowly got pulled towards moving pictures on the screen. They could not afford to host plays regularly, so, they requested the patrons to notify the theatre about possible dates when they would be able to visit. Once enough interest was generated it would then host the play on the date with the most attention. Hopper sipped his coffee and started thinking hard. There was something about the past dates that were written in the poster.

Suddenly, old Martha walked in while shaking her head, "Those bastards. They'll let a random person select a random bunch of numbers to decide the winner. How's that fair? What if that guy's unlucky for me? I never win anything." She crumpled a lottery ticket and threw it into the dustbin.

She dropped a file at Hopper's desk and grumbled, "Hopper? You listening?"

Hopper was humming a tune.

"Would you stop contemplating over coffee and look at these files? They found another body today. Chief wants you to go take a look asap. It's quite horrible this time."

In a moment, a light bulb flashed in Hopper's mind, *'Theatre,' 'Director,' 'No fixed dates,' 'Random dates selected by patrons.'* The best way to pick a random pattern would be to select a random group of people to generate the pattern. It was a long shot, but it was all they got at the moment. He got up, kissed Martha and ran towards the room where Alex sat. The old geezer was a passionate follower of obscure plays.

It was lunchtime in Hawkins Middle School. Mike came down to the

cafeteria with his friends. Eleven was walking right beside him. She kept looking around the big hall with amazement in her eyes. She had spent most of her life either locked up in the lab, or hiding inside a tent made of blankets, or lost inside deserted woods or locked inside a cabin. To her, this was the grandest view she had ever had, except Mike, he was still the best. Before leaving the staircase, she had asked Mike to hold her hand while they walked around the school. For some reason, the others started laughing as Mike's face went red and he started stuttering. Eleven felt worried, was Mike sick? But then Mike told her that it was not usual to hold hands inside the school, but he promised that he would not leave her side. So, they started their grand tour of the school. They visited the old classroom where Eleven had embraced her destiny and said goodbye to Mike. The boys were unable to look at the wall where she had pinned the monster and destroyed it along with herself. She held their hands together and assured them that she'll never leave them again. Then they made their way to the stadium where Eleven had used a makeshift sensory deprivation tank to find Will.

She reached the bench and looked at Mike, "This is where you asked me to go to the Snowball with you."

Mike felt alarmed, what if she told the guys...

"You also kissed me here for the first time."

'SHIT', Mike looked at the gang from the corner of his eyes. Max was laughing, but the rest of them seemed like they had just discovered a scandal. Then a multitude of voices rang in the air;

"You sly fox. While we were fighting for our lives, you were sucking her face?"

"Eleven didn't get food, Lucas. She was hungry before the monster took her. Of course, she didn't get any food. You were fooling around with her."

"I was stuck in the upside down, and the demo-gorgon was pushing a pipe down my throat. And you were asking her out to the Snowball?"

They were all laughing, the nightmares were over, and the hardships

seemed like yesterday. Mike joined them, and all the pain and suffering vanished in a gust of wind.

Eleven was still taking in the sight around her. Suddenly she felt a tinge of hunger in her stomach. She thought about telling Mike, but he was so excited to show her around, she decided to let it go for now. She had received training in the lab to suppress her hunger and could go on for a long time without food. Mike suddenly stopped and looked at her earnestly, "Eleven? Are you hungry?"

Eleven was shocked, *'how did Mike know?'*

"It's okay Mike."

"No, it's not. You're hungry, and we're going to the cafeteria right now." Mike gripped her hand and dragged her towards the staircase.

That's how Eleven found herself in the cafeteria, waiting in line for food. She kept looking at Mike's face. He appeared healthy, but something was wrong. She could feel it but had no idea what. They took the food and started searching for a table. Eleven saw an empty table by the window and moved towards it. She reached the table and sat down on a chair, leaving a space beside her for Mike. She turned around and saw them hanging at the back, still waiting with their plates. They looked concerned, Mike looked like as if he was preparing for the end of the world. Eleven had no idea what was happening, but she waved her hand towards them and flashed a smile. Suddenly there was a thump at the table. She gently turned around and came face to face with a group of large boys and a mean looking girl. One of the boys moved towards her and shouted, "Who the fuck do you think you are? You have the guts to sit on our table? Don't you know who we are? Leave now."

Eleven remembered what Mike had told her about using her powers, she decided to get up and leave. But suddenly the nice-looking professor from the class came from nowhere and stood in front of the boys.

"Uh... Mr. Clarke... Sir."

"You want to drag this further? All the way to detention for four consecutive weekends?"

In response, the boys ran away from there. Mr. Clarke smiled at Eleven, "Jim told me to check up on you. He was scared that others may try to bully you. He requested me to keep an eye out for trouble for the first few days. So, if anyone bothers you again, please come to my office."

The gang arrived and proceeded to take their seats around the table. Before leaving, Mr. Clarke suddenly asked Mike, "Jane reminds me of that cousin of yours who came to school last year. Eleanor, right? How's she doing?"

Dustin answered the question because Mike had suddenly lost the ability to move his jaw muscles. Then Mr. Clarke left, and they started eating. Mike had a distant look on his face, and Eleven began to feel worried, *'What is wrong with Mike?'*

Max had gone to get some beverages. She came back to the table and placed six cans of coke on the table. An image flashed in front of Eleven's eyes and her face twisted in pain. She remembered the cold white room, Papa giving her instructions on how to use her powers and the man in white clothes who had hit her with a metal rod that started a fire through her body. She nearly gagged and was about to turn her face away when Mike picked up the can and threw it out of the window. Others sitting on the table watched in horror as Mike picked up every can and threw them through the window one by one. Then he placed his palm below Eleven's right ribcage and gently whispered in her ears, "It's okay. They didn't know. I'll tell them. Please don't be hurt."

His voice was shaking.

Eleven was shocked, she had never told Mike or Hopper about the test with the coke can, *'How did he know? How did he know where the man in white clothes had hit me with the metal rod? Why is he crying? And why is he hugging me so tightly now?'*

Eleven gently placed her hands on Mike's shoulders while he hugged her in front of the entire cafeteria. Eleven was worried, she needed to ask Mike a question. She was sure that he wouldn't lie, but she wasn't sure if she was ready to hear the truth. *'Does Mike know who I really am?'*

7. E2: Gravity - Act III

Episode 2: Gravity

Act III: Unleashed

Michael Brown was a tough son a bitch. He had been a journalist for far too long, he had been attacked before, he had been shot once, he had been almost beaten to death on multiple occasions. So, it did not surprise him when he woke up tied to a chair in a well-lit room. He opened his eyes and cursed loudly as he realized that he was sitting on a stage. Hundreds of old and empty chairs lined the space in front of him. He realized that he was in a run-down theatre and he had no idea why. He heard a strange sound coming from his right, he turned his head and saw a tall man polishing a knife on a piece of lather. The man stopped the blade and looked at Michael,

"Welcome to the greatest show on earth." The man had a French accent.

"I swear if this is a prank, I'll...."

"No prank mister journalist, you have an audience."

Michael turned his head, and his heart stopped. His girlfriend was tied to a chair in front of the stage. She was apparently unconscious, and her head sagged below her shoulder.

"THE FUCK? WHAT THE FUCK?"

The men smiled, "It's an encore."

Michael calmed himself. He had faced danger before, "What do you want?"

"Salvation Mr. Brown. I want salvation." A voice spoke from the shadows.

At that exact moment, Michael knew in his guts that he was completely fucked. A man with a headful of white hair walked out from behind the curtains.

"You? You did this? Who the fuck *ARE* you?"

"You ask redundant questions, Mr. Brown."

"What do you want?"

The men sighed, he didn't like redundant questions.

Michael breathed. Martin Brenner was not just an evil scientist, he was also a psychopath. He needed to keep his head leveled, "What do you want from me?"

"That's the good question. I want you to disappear from this world." Martin had a finality in his voice.

Michael had made many enemies in his life. He always ran after the truth, and that pissed off too many people. But something felt odd about this interaction. He tried to remember the discussion he had with his source back in the bar.

"MKULTRA! Is that what this is all about?"

The men grimaced, "You are persistent."

"Look. I've already published the piece. I can't take it back. But I won't publish the second part. I'll disappear, just as you want." Michael was bargaining now; his girlfriend was still passed out cold.

"No, Mr. Brown. I know what you are. You're driven by a false sense of morality. I've read your earlier work covering Vietnam war, Bangladesh War, Lebanese Civil War, Iraq-Iran War amongst others. You think you are a beacon of truth in the vast sea of darkness covering the world."

Michael stared at Martin in defiance. What this man was describing was the absolute truth. Michael Brown was not a man who was motivated by fame or money. He had always chased the fact like a hound and never backed down even in the face of impossible odds. He had fought for those who couldn't defend themselves and won their wars with nothing but pen and paper. In his latest stint, he had blown the cover of a secret project run by the CIA named 'MKUltra.' He had discovered the tragedies surrounding the Project, went in like

a one-man army and made so much noise that the Congress had to appoint a committee to investigate the lunacy. He was about to publish the second part of the article to erase a monster from the face of the planet. The fiend was standing in front of him right now.

"I'm familiar with your work. If not today then tomorrow, if not tomorrow then next week, if not next week then next month, if not next month then next year, you WILL try to stop me again. You'll come after me as long as both of us are alive."

Michael gritted his teeth, "You stole those children from their parents. You destroyed their lives. YOU MURDERED THEIR INNOCENCE."

"No. Mr. Brown. I am saving them from themselves."

Then Martin turned towards the other man and started talking if Michael didn't exist, "The Church committee is too much invested in the project. Someone else is driving them from behind. We're moving our timeline. We test the final Control Matrix for Subject Eleven tonight."

"Tonight? Is she ready?" The other man sounded concerned.

Martin hardened his jaw, "No, she isn't. But she's our greatest asset. If anyone can pull through, then she can."

Then he sighed, "If she can't, I want you to get rid of the body by tonight. Then blow town and meet me at Hawkins. We're going back."

Michael felt the impending doom. They had started ignoring him as if his fate had already been decided. He needed to buy time. He didn't know why but he needed to stall these men at all costs. He chose to prod further, "What's Subject Eleven? What's a Control Matrix?"

Martin looked at him in a staggered manner, as if he was hearing a dead man speaking. Then he laughed, "You like stories, Mr. Brown? Let me tell you a story. Maybe you can cover it in the afterlife."

Martin went in front of the stage and spread his arms to his sides as if he was delivering a sermon.

"A weapon starts out as a piece of metal. You take it to a forge, pump the flames and heat it till it starts glowing red hot. Then you start beating it with a hammer until it starts taking shape. Are you with me Mr. Brown?"

He didn't wait for the answer, "Then once it reaches its final form, you cool it down, take it to a grinding wheel and start sharpening the edges. It's a hectic process, and most shards don't make it through. Do you give up?"

Martin spoke with determination, "No, you discard the failures and start again."

Michael felt a fuse going off inside his head, he had figured out what the man was talking about. But it made no sense, "THEY WERE JUST CHILDREN!"

Martin didn't flinch, "They are more than what they seem to be."

He continued, "Most of our test subjects do not survive the Ascension Mechanism. It's a sorry state of affairs. We were having a lot of problems with the bodies. Not to mention the parents. Just some time ago, a woman came after us with a vengeance and nearly shut us down."

Michael knew the woman, in fact, he had visited her in the past. He had taken one look at the woman and swore to destroy the psychopath who had taken her soul away. Teresa Ives was the victim of a tragedy orchestrated by this man. Michael was the weapon that would bring forth vengeance in her name.

"Then it clicked. What if we could get our metal and the world kept chasing after a ghost? Then I found Mr. Louise right next door. He is a ghost and very good at his job."

The tall man, Louise, gave a bow.

"We would identify the targets. Mr. Louise here would take care of the parents and bring the subjects to us. In case the subjects didn't make it through, he would also take care of the bodies. It fuels his addiction and gives us our candidates. It's the perfect cover and it

really helped with the accelerated program," Martin was pleased with himself.

Michael looked at the chair opposite to him and tears came into his eyes. He knew that it was too late to save her. This man had no conscience at all. He would still try; "Let her go. I am the one who you really want."

Martin crouched in front of the other chair, "No Mr. Brown. People who have lost something become spirits and hunt their prey till the end of time. Both of you need to go away."

Then he stood up and nodded towards Louise who grinned like a child who had just received a gift. Michael had heard about this man. 'The Director' had a gruesome way of killing people. Martin started walking towards the door with a smooth gait.

He was on the verge of breaking down, but he glared at Martin and spoke his last words; "We might be gone, but someone will take our place. YOU CAN NOT RUN FROM JUSTICE."

Martin stopped dead in his tracks. He stood there for a moment and then turned back. Michael saw the fury in his eyes, a hellfire was raging in those bottomless pits. Martin spoke the next words as if he was having difficulty pronouncing them, "I HAVE NEVER RUN AWAY FROM ANYTHING IN MY LIFE."

Martin wasn't speaking those words to Michael or The Director. He was shouting them to the empty seats in front of the stage. Then he slammed the door on his way out. Michael swallowed and looked at Louise. The man smiled cheerfully and then crouched in front of his girlfriend. She was still sleeping, but then the man took out a bottle, opened the cap and held it beneath her nose. She came awake in a few minutes and felt a horrible pain on her cheek.

Two police cruisers raced through the night in some random part of New York City. Their tires were spewing blue smoke as they drifted along corners at very high speed. They swerved through a final curve and came to a halt in front of a run-down theatre. Five police officers got off the cabs and started jogging towards the back door.

"Hopper, you sure this is the place?" The officer at the back asked the leader.

"We know the dates of the murders committed by the director. This is one of the four theatres in the city which hosted plays on those exact dates. And this is the only theatre which never hosted plays outside those dates."

"But he kills at random locations, he could just take the dates from the paper. He could just use the proxy. Hell, he could be a patron of the fine arts as well." The man was not convinced.

"We're not here to find a criminal. Today's not even a date. We're here to find the guy who owns this place, talk to him and go through his list of patrons. After that, we hit the next three theatres on the list."

"It's too big of a jump, don't you think?"

"Have some faith on *Lady Luck*."

Hopper was about to reach the back door when he saw a sedan approaching them. It was late, and he couldn't see inside the car, but he caught a glimpse of a man with white hair. The sedan picked up speed and went around the corner. Hopper reached the back entrance and placed his ear to the door, then he pulled away in shock as he heard a muffled scream coming from inside. In a moment, a battering ram crashed against the door, and Hopper charged through with his shotgun and came face to face with his prey.

A tall man was standing on the stage with a knife in his hand, there was a man tied in a chair to his right and a woman tied to a chair to his left. The woman was nearly dead, the signs of the tall man's knife were clear throughout her body. Hopper had seen marks like that before, only this time, they were still fresh. The man tied to the chair was sobbing historically. His mouth was covered with sticky tape. Hopper gritted his teeth and moved towards the tall man, the shotgun pointed straight towards his chest.

"Well well, the police! Someone there has some brain after all."

Hopper moved his eyes towards the woman and grimaced. She had wounds all over her body, and they were all bleeding heavily. She was suffering from immense pain, but she couldn't scream for some reason. Hopper looked at her mouth and almost threw up. *'This was the work of the devil.'* Images flashed by his eyes, images that he could never forget. Before coming down to the theatre, he had visited a ditch near the dry docks. Some workers had found a body and called it in. He reached there, went close to the body and then threw up his breakfast along with the coffee. Hopper was a veteran of war, but even his eyes couldn't believe what it was seeing. The body was severely mutilated beyond recognition, but it had belonged to a small girl once. Hopper's wife would soon be giving birth to a baby girl as well. The child would be born in a world where monsters roamed around looking for prey, either within a prison or outside one. *'What if this body was my baby girl's?'*

Hopper hardened his jaw and walked towards the man who was smiling for some god damn reason. Hopper realized that the man had no remorse, no regret and no intention to stop. He didn't deserve redemption because there was something fundamentally wrong with him. *'He needs to go back to his maker to claim warranty.'*

Hopper looked calmly at the man standing in front of him. He was as tall as Hopper, and his chest was right in front of the barrel of his shotgun.

"I have the right to remain silent? Anything I say will be held...." The tall man was smiling and reciting his Miranda rights. Hopper waited for the man to finish and as soon as he was done, he confirmed, "You do."

The Remington roared to life and the top half of The Director's body disappeared in a cloud of red mist.

Mike and the guys were standing at the entrance to the gym. In front of them, Max was teaching Eleven about riding skateboards. She had tried to use her powers at first, but then Max put a stop to that, "This is not how it's done Eleven. You can't always rely on your powers. Haven't you seen superhero movies? Superman has his kryptonite."

Eleven had asked Mike multiple times about what happened back in

the cafeteria, but Mike kept evading the question. He requested Eleven to withdraw the question because he didn't want to lie to her. He promised to tell her when the time would be right. So, Eleven decided to trust Mike and give him some time.

Eleven tried getting back onto the skateboard but fell down again. She jumped back up and looked at Mike who flashed him an enthusiastic smile. Eleven groaned and placed a foot on the skateboard. Before she could push the board using her other foot, Max put her arm on Eleven's shoulder, "It takes a lot of time and practice. You can't just rush things. You have to go through a bit of pain, but once you learn to control it, you become an expert. You will never fall again."

Eleven flashed a weak smile and tried getting back on the skateboard. She turned the skateboard around and froze as her eyes fell on Mike. Others did not notice it, but Mike was standing still as if he was in a trance. Eleven jumped on the skateboard and pushed on the ground with her powers. A few people in the gym noticed the skateboard that was speeding as if it was powered by a V8 engine. Eleven reached Mike in a flash and jumped off the skateboard. She held her fall using her powers as the skateboard zoomed forward and shattered into pieces after hitting the wall.

Mike remembered seeing Eleven getting onto the skateboard, he also remembered seeing Max putting her arm on Eleven's shoulder and whispering something. Then he found himself strapped to a metallic chair in a room with white walls and ceiling. Some weird contraption was placed around his head, and he couldn't move it at all. He was back into a memory fragment, and he was pissed off. Eleven came to school at long last, and he wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. He knew that he would be going back to reality after some time, and in the real world, only a few seconds would have passed since his soul went missing. But the memories often left traumatic aftermath and ruined his day. He was witnessing the memory through Eleven's eyes, and he could sense the fear that was crawling through her heart. He wanted to wake up from this nightmare as soon as possible.

Suddenly a figure came into his field of vision. He moved his eyes to the front and saw the woman with the golden hair smiling at him,

"Hey sweetheart. It's time for the final test. Once this is done, we can go have waffles, okay?" She looked scared as if the next few moments would decide whether she gets to live or die a horrible death. Mike knew that she was lying through her teeth, but he was stuck in a video that had been recorded earlier. He could only see it and contemplate later.

The woman lost her composure, and her voice started cracking, "This is going to hurt a bit. But we're sure that you can pull through. Just focus on my voice as I guide you, okay? Once it's done, you'll become extremely powerful. Papa will be pleased with you."

'Martin Brenner,' all the memories Eleven had with that man was disturbing and painful. Mike wanted to rip the harnesses and run away, but they were too strong. He kept looking at the woman, she disappeared for a moment to get something and came back with a piece of paper. Mike squinted his eyes. He had seen that paper before but couldn't remember where. The woman put it up on a board made of glass and hung it in front of Mike's face. Mike read the text inscribed at the top of the board, "Control Matrix – Inhibition Override"

It made no sense at all. Suddenly a man with white hair appeared beside the woman. Mike's swallowed as Martin Brenner shouted at the woman, "ABORT THE TEST. Someone found Louise."

The woman was visibly shocked, "What? Who?"

"Some random officer who got extremely lucky. I told that idiot to use a different place. But *NOO*, Mr. know-it-all had to use that fucking stage of his tonight. Something about an encore."

"We can ring him out before he blows our cover, right?"

"That won't be necessary. The bastard has a hole in his chest."

The woman still didn't look relieved, "What do we do? We need more subjects. The new ones can't even make it past the second trial. Thirteen was the better of the lot but still couldn't make through the third trial. That leaves Eight and Eleven as the prime candidates, and frankly, I don't think Eight has the potential. It all boils down to

Eleven now. What if she can't survive the Ascension?"

Martin moved the glass panel away and spoke calmly, "No. She'll survive. She's the one who will bring salvation to this world."

He smiled at Mike, "You think it was just luck that someone caught up to Louise by chance? You think it was a coincidence that Teresa managed to get her hands on a Control Matrix? You think it was a miracle that the old geezer finally managed to create the anti-hemorrhage medicine today? You think it's a magic that helped Michael Brown escape his fate tonight?"

Martin took a pause and started releasing the harnesses that held Mike in place, "My daughter is the child of Destiny. When she wants something, the world conspires to fulfill her desires. When she seeks vengeance, demons from the deepest depths of hell rise to avenge her. When she seeks refuge, angels from the farthest corners of heaven descend to protect her. Eleven has the power to do the impossible."

Martin finished releasing the harnesses and gently helped Mike to sit up, "My daughter is like a massive star that attracts planets towards its core. Her emotions are like gravity that generates bonds that are impossible to escape from. It's about time we do something about it. I have a few ideas."

Martin looked at the woman and smiled triumphantly, "We have found our sword. We do not need any other subject. Purge the rest and blow the lab. We're going home."

Martin put a hand on Mike's head and smiled, "Hey Eleven. I've got good news. We're moving to a place called Hawkins. It's a nice place without so many people. You'll love it there." He looked as if he had finally made a choice and felt satisfied with the consequences.

Mike was dumbfounded, he always believed that Eleven had stayed inside the lab for her entire life, *'Where in the world was she before coming to Hawkins?'* Then a flashbulb went off in front of his eyes, and a moment later he opened his eyes to see Eleven's face looming over his head. He also noticed that her face was upside down and to top it off, he was basically lying on the ground with his head on Eleven's

lap. He wanted to commit Seppuku, *'the shame.'*

Eleven gently lifted his face to hers and whispered, "Mike. You need to answer the question, now." Mike just nodded, it was time to confess his darkest moment to Eleven.

'The Field of the Fireflies.'

It was time to confront her past, together.

A week after blowing a hole through a man's chest, Hopper was sitting in front of the chief's office on the third floor of the NYPD HQ. He was summoned after two hours.

"Good afternoon Jim."

Hopper wanted this to get over with, "Hey boss."

"You were almost on your way to prison for murder. But then I received a call from a senator, someone heading the Church Committee. He pulled some strings and got you out. You are either damn lucky, or you have a guardian angel out there."

Hopper looked up in shock, he was sure that he would be going to jail.

"The DA's agreed to a deal. The man was going to kill a woman, and you tried to stop him. But he didn't listen and tried attacking you, so you had to take the shot. I think no one will try to seek retribution for the director. The last body was too gruesome."

Jim nodded, he was feeling relieved. He wanted to be there when his daughter would be born. He also prepared for what was about to come in his way.

"But you need to go away Jim" The chief growled softly and banged his hand on the table, "We need to bury this thing in a place where the sun doesn't shine."

"I'll quit the force. I'll get another job, maybe as a security guard."

The old man smiled, "No. You are a damn good officer, and the world could use someone like you. I have a better idea. There's a position open at a place called Hawkins in Indiana. Small town, no crimes reported in the last decade. There's an energy lab run by the government but not much commercial activity. Perfect place to disappear from the world in my opinion. You still get to be a police officer, and you can return to New York after, I don't know, a decade or so?"

Hopper stood up to leave. He went to the door and stopped for a second.

"Jim?"

Hopper ripped his badge off and threw it to the chief, "I'm not sorry for what I did. I'll do it again if I have to." Then he walked out.

In a certain place, at a certain time, a badge was ripped from a uniform as a man swore an oath to deliver justice to the world. The second prophecy forced the world towards the impending doom.

"Michael Brown became Murray Bauman and left his life behind. It was required to protect Lisa," Murray lowered his head.

"I didn't publish the second article. Lisa was in the hospital for a long time and was exposed to danger."

"How's she doing?" Nancy wanted to stop herself but needed to know everything about the psychopath.

"She spent nearly a month in the hospital, and a group of brilliant plastic surgeons restored part of her face. She could finally eat after three months. But she never got her speech back. And then came the trauma."

Murray grimaced, "She was never able to sleep for more than two hours. The man with the knife would slice her dreams and then she would wake up screaming and panting for breath."

Nancy remembered Mike and Eleven as they were holding each other during the dance. Then an image flashed by her eyes, Mike was

holding Eleven's hand tightly as she was trying to leave him at the hospital. She inhaled deeply, *'That monster had left ruins wherever he went. He needed to be stopped.'*

"I'm sorry Murray. I wish that we could do something."

"Every night leads to morning, Nancy. One day, an old geezer came out of nowhere, rescued Lisa from her nightmare and brought her to the light. He was a psychiatrist, and he was very good at reading and understanding people's emotions. Last year she left the country to live with her parents. Finally, she can sleep without crying, " Murray grinned a smile through the pain and tears.

Then he gritted his teeth, "It's not over, NOT YET. I found him once, I'll find him again and when I do...."

Jonathan spoke up, "You'll kill him?"

"No. I'll expose him for the monster that he is. There is someone else who will deliver justice."

Hopper took a shotgun out of the bag. It was the same Remington 870 that had erased a monster from this earth, it was around 7 pounds in weight. Someone left it on his porch in NY the night before he was going to move to Hawkins. There was a small note attached to the weapon, *'Justice.'* He put the gun away and held the victim's photograph under the light. He always thought that 'The Director' numbered his victims out of sheer lunacy, but he noticed the number carefully this time. It was etched at the girl's wrist. *'013,'* the font was too similar. A font that he had seen on Eleven's wrist. A font that was the mark of the devil.

Hopper always wanted to find out whether Eleven was born with the telekinetic powers or there was something inside her that made her more suitable for imparting these powers. *'He never got to know whether it was Jane Ives or Terry Ives who was selected by destiny to become a weapon or give birth to one.'* But now that he had a clue, he needed to see the old case files.

The hounds had been unleashed at long last, they would hunt their prey

till the end of time.

Epilogue

It was a quiet night somewhere far away from Hawkins, Indiana. A cold wind was rustling through the concrete maze and trying its best to vanquish the fire that was providing warmth to the huddled masses spread around it. A radio crackled, and someone from the group answered it,

"What the fuck do you want?"

"Its time to move. Someone was spotted snooping around the castle."

A figure jumped up from the group and went to a corner, "Do you have eyes on the target?"

"Not yet, but a little birdie told me that they are trying to find Eleven's control matrix."

A moment later, four shadows walked away from the warmth and vanished into the night as the fire yielded to the wind.

It was a beautiful morning somewhere near Hawkins, Indiana. Hopper was making breakfast for two. He made pancakes and eggs. Then he went to the refrigerator and took out some Eggos. Today was a grand day, Eleven would be going to school, and later tonight she'll have her first grand birthday party. Joyce didn't cut any corners while making the arrangements. Eleven was taking longer to get ready today, but Hopper understood her excitement. He casually walked to the TV and switched the channel to the news. Then he rammed his coffee cup through the screen as Eleven walked out. Her face was masked by shock and horror, "You broke the TV?"

"A poisonous insect was sitting on the screen, so I squashed it. You don't need a TV now because you'll be with Mike for the better part of the day. We're getting a new TV by the end of the week. Okay?" Hopper sounded like a person facing the firing squad.

"Okay, I don't need a TV right now." Eleven flashed a smile and sat at the table.

Hopper swallowed and sat opposite to her, he could still remember part of the breaking news,

'... has gone up in flames. The firefighters are still trying to douse the flames, but we have the confirmation that...'

Hopper knew that house because he had been there multiple times in the past. Hopper felt like a soldier who had pressed his foot against a landmine and couldn't take it off. The problem was that, sooner or later, he had to move.

It was a peaceful morning somewhere near an unknown curb close to a little-known street in a town called Hawkins, Indiana. Karen was driving home after dropping Mike at school. He would be spending the night at the Byers. Joyce was throwing a grand party for Jane's birthday, who was Mike's date for the Snowball and Mike was a special guest. Karen felt really happy for some reason, *'My boy's all grown up. Jane is a beautiful girl.'*

Yet she couldn't shake the feeling off that she had seen that girl somewhere before. Suddenly she suddenly pressed the break as hard as she could, and the car screeched to a halt. Karen kept looking through the windscreen as if she had seen a ghost, *'The birthday party! Jane Hopper! Jane Ives! Teresa Ives! The birth date coincides with the approximate date Teresa told me. Now that I remember, she does have some resemblance to Jane. Is it possible...?'*

She started the engine, drove the car as fast as she could and reached home in a short time. She was about to turn the car towards the garage when she saw an unknown car in her driveway. The doors were open, and the engines were still running. Karen felt the urgent need to enter her home, she stopped the car in the driveway and ran towards the main door. She yanked the door open, ran inside and screamed at the scene in front of her.

The saga continues in 'Armageddon Part 3' (Airing Now).

8. E3: Pantheon - Act I

A/N: I'd like to wholeheartedly apologize to my readers for breaking the third episode into dedicated chapters. This pivotal episode is where I tie all the strings, and an extensive chapter might seem too long. So I used a different format and broke it into multiple smaller chapters.

Episode 3: Pantheon

'From the Greek word - Pantheon: The Temple of all Gods'

Episode Summary: Mike and Eleven must embrace their destiny to confront their greatest adversary. But they are not alone. Legends return to the world of Stranger Things to protect the sacred bond that would vanquish evil from the heart of men. Our brave heroes will assemble at the Byers' residence to celebrate Eleven's birthday. But will fate allow her a peaceful evening full of love and happiness? Can the Gods save them in time?

Act I: Elpis

'In ancient mythology, Elpis is the personification and spirit of Hope.'

A man was sprinting through a concrete labyrinth as fast as his feet could carry him. Cold neon lights streaked over the man's head as he strived to outrun the wristwatch ticking away on his arm. The man was gasping for breath, and his legs felt like ten-ton hammers, but he couldn't stop. He had to deliver an artifact at all cost before time ran out.

He turned around a corner and nearly crashed into a woman who was caressing a child in her lap. The man squeaked an apology while running and plunged into an elevator before the door closed. He stood up to take a breath, but his lungs sent a memo to him, 'Dear Sir, you DO realize that you suffer from Asthma? It would be very kind if you could stop running.' The man didn't answer the memo. He started running as soon as the elevator doors opened and a moment later, crashed through a door like a hurricane, "I... have... the... j..."

A voice replied, "I don't feel like drinking it anymore." Ted Wheeler suddenly had the immense urge to mix some hemlock in the bottle he was carrying and drink it all at once. He noticed that his wife Karen was sitting on the bed with another woman and both were giggling at his distress. He sighed and started walking towards his wife, *'Crazy mood swings.'* But as soon as he reached the bed, the other woman snatched the bottle from his hand, unscrewed the cap and put the bottle to her lips. Ted was shocked for a second, but then he realized, *'She must be having the cravings as well.'*

His wife was pregnant and would often get the craziest cravings, the other woman was pregnant too. Ted was used to dealing with pregnant women and their cravings, he couldn't blame the other woman just like he couldn't blame his wife. He merely stared at his wife and raised his eyebrows, *'Who is this?'* Karen gave an apologetic smile, *'A friend.'* The woman finished the juice and handed the bottle to Ted. Then she grinned like a child, "Tastes like pineapple."

The woman introduced herself to Ted and Karen. Her name was Teresa Ives, and she was from a small city near to Hawkins, about a few hours' drive from the hospital. She was working in Hawkins National Laboratory, and she was five months pregnant at that moment. During her shift that day, she had suffered from some health issues, so the kind scientists at the lab brought her to the hospital for a check-up. Teresa seemed like a very affable and fun-loving person. She kept talking about all the neat things they made her do in the lab with loads of excitement. Karen started smiling, and soon she was giggling as Teresa began cracking a lot of funny one-liners. Ted joined in the fun too, and soon they were arguing about ancient Astronauts and Aliens.

They didn't pay any attention to the clock which was ticking towards the infinity. Suddenly the door flung open, and a man walked in. He had a head full of white hair, and he was wearing an expensive tuxedo. He came towards the bed and stood in front of Teresa, "Why did you run away from the ward?"

Teresa looked away from the gaze as the smile faded from her face, "I... I am sorry. I was getting bored. There was no one to talk to."

The man in the suit sighed, "It seems you won't listen to instructions

Teresa. If you are fit enough to leave the ward, then you are fit enough to return home by yourself. We are not providing the car today."

Teresa suddenly glanced at the man, and her eyes reflected fear, "Please. I don't have enough cash left to pay for the cab."

"Take the bus." The man slammed the door behind him.

Teresa grimaced and picked up her purse to count the cash she needed to take the ride home. She looked exhausted, and Ted noticed the lines beneath her eyes. She was apparently sick, and to make things worse, she was pregnant. She needed rest at the earliest and not a long journey on a bus. Ted glanced at Karen who was already staring at him with a question in her eyes, he smiled and nodded. Karen grinned and placed her arm on Teresa's shoulder, "Why don't you spend the night at our place? It'll be great."

Teresa jerked her head towards Karen as her eyes opened wide with disbelief, "Yo... Your place?"

Ted confirmed, "We'd be lucky to have you for dinner, Teresa. And I'll drop you at your place tomorrow. I have some work in the city." In response, Terry beamed as if a massive weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Ted also smiled, he didn't need to go to the city, *'until that moment.'*

Thirty minutes later a car entered the path that led to the Wheeler Residence, situated at the end of the cul-de-sac. Ted stopped the vehicle at the gate as the ladies climbed out, then he drove the car to the garage and parked it. He came back to the main entrance where Karen and Teresa were waiting for him. He went to the door and knocked it two and a half times. *'It was a code that only one other person in the world recognized.'* The door slowly opened but no one was there, the babysitter had apparently moved away according to the instructions from the other person. Before Ted could move inside to catch the culprit, Teresa rushed in through the opening.

As soon as She cleared the door a ball of fluff jumped out of hiding, "Boo!" Teresa didn't even flinch, she turned around in a smooth motion and picked the little girl in her arms. The girl laughed as the

woman with the golden hair chuckled and kissed her. Karen and Ted kept watching in awe as their daughter Nancy, who was always afraid of strangers, kept playing with a random woman whom they had just met in the hospital.

A few hours later they were sitting in the main hall and talking about random things. Nancy was playing with her toys. She would often run to Teresa who would then stop talking and play with Nancy for a few minutes. Then Nancy would feel content and go back to her routine with the barbies and the castles. Both Karen and Ted were amazed at how proficient Teresa was in handling children even though she didn't have a child of her own yet. *'She's amazing.'*

Just before lunch, the couple gave Teresa a tour of the house.

"What's that?" Teresa was extremely curious.

"That? That's my Lazy Boy. Wanna try it?" Ted loved his couch.

Teresa never said no to anything. She would become amazed at the simplest things many people would take for granted. Then finally the couple took her to a small room and opened the door. Teresa kept looking into the room but didn't walk in. Her eyes were lost in the eternity, and she was standing at the door as if she was afraid of breaking the sanctity of the room.

"This room is for our baby boy, who would be born soon." Karen already had the results.

Teresa suddenly looked at Karen with an intense stare, "Boy! A baby boy. Does he have a name yet?"

Ted sighed, "We've been fighting with the name for the last few days. We haven't decided yet." Karen rolled her eyes in frustration.

"Oh, okay." Teresa closed the door, she seemed lost in thought. They came back downstairs and assembled for lunch.

Once lunch was over, Ted disappeared for a few hours to take a nap. Nancy was fast asleep with her head in Teresa's lap while Karen was knitting a sweater for Nancy. Suddenly Teresa spoke, "Hey Karen. Is giving birth painful?"

"Huh? I mean yeah. But it's worth it at the end. I mean look at Nancy." Karen smiled at Teresa. *'First-time mothers were always afraid of the pain.'*

Teresa nodded sideways, "It's not about me. It's about the child. My daughter. They say something is wrong with her. They are running tests but not finding anything. I am afraid of her health."

Karen clutched Teresa's arm tightly, "Have faith, Terry. Things always turn good at the end."

Suddenly Ted ran into the room as if he was being chased by a Troll, "Eureka! Eureka!"

Teresa was staring at Ted's hands, but they were empty, *'What does he have? I don't see anything.'* Karen sighed, "Another name Ted?"

"Dustin, we're naming him Dustin." Ted was satisfied.

Karen laughed, "The Hendersons' got that name."

Ted looked aghast, "What? Is there a queue or something? First come first serve?"

They fought with the name for the next twenty minutes, but it was going nowhere. Hundreds of names were fired from each side, and none of them hit the mark. Teresa was busy playing with Nancy, she had woken up and immediately started racing around the room. Suddenly someone shouted, "Terry?"

"Ah. Yes?" She abruptly returned to the present.

"What do you think is the better name? Brandon or Zachary?" Ted was down to his two last options.

Karen vehemently objected, "Those two are not even in the list. How about Neil?"

Ted furiously flicked his diary, "Aha. I got the best option. Let's name him Finn."

Karen sat down on the sofa and sighed, "Enough. This is getting

nowhere. I have an absurd idea."

Ted and Karen stared at her as if she was the Genie from the magic lamp. Karen looked at Ted and spoke with resolve, "Why don't Teresa name our boy, and we name her girl?" There was absolute silence in the room like the calm before the storm. Karen sighed and prepared for the verbal tornado about to come towards her. But a moment later she received an impossible answer, "Okay."

'It's magic.'

Ted spoke up, "Let's lay down the rules. Both parties get five minutes. Each party gets to select only one name, and that's final. No changing, okay?" He was too enthusiastic for some reason.

Both women nodded, and Ted moved to his wife and started whispering in her ear. Teresa picked Nancy up in her lap and began conspiring with her. Every few seconds later they would look at Karen and Ted and proceed to make funny faces, *'We will have the better name.'*

After five minutes Ted left and returned with two identical flower vases. They had a peculiar design, and a sinuous black line encircled their bases. He handed one to Teresa and one to Karen. Then he gave each of them a marker pen, "Write down the name at the base. Then we exchange them at the same time and write the other name. This way we keep the surprise alive until the last moment and keep a copy as a memoir."

The ladies finished writing the names. *Teresa named the boy who would be born in an unknown town called Hawkins, Indiana. Karen named the girl who would be born in a little-known city not far away from Hawkins, Indiana.* The ladies exchanged the vase and their eyes lit up with excitement, they loved the names. Teresa started jumping in excitement, "Ooh guys. This is so cool. Our children are named together even before they are born. Woohoo, I am sure they would grow up to be great people. Jane might become a Doctor and Mike might become an Astronaut. And one day they will meet, the Astronaut will meet the Doctor, and they'll fly to the moon." Ted and Karen kept laughing at the excitement radiating from the unknown woman that they had met at the hospital. She had a way of

convincing others into believing in her fantasies, and Karen and Ted got swept away by the flood of emotions.

Suddenly Teresa ceased laughing and glanced at the flower vase, "Hey Karen, Ted?"

"Yeah?"

"You two have done so much for me. No, so much for us." She smiled sadly, "Can I ask you for one last favor?"

The couple noticed the sincerity in her voice and straightened up, "Anything."

Teresa's voice was quivering, "If a day comes when I am no longer here, will you take care of Jane? She has no one in this world except me," her eyes were glistening.

Karen came to Teresa and hugged her, "Jane and Teresa Ives will always have a home here. No matter what happens, Jane will never be alone in this universe. That's a promise."

Ted took out a flower vase from the drawer and slowly turned the base towards the light coming from the windows. A lifetime ago, two names were written at the bottom of the strange shape which was adorned with a sinuous black line around the edge. Ted looked perplexed, he had no clue why he had dreamt about that particular day last night. But then he saw the names and smiled absently, *'Michael Wheeler and Jane Ives. They were named together even before they were born. They were supposed to be soulmates, in the purest form of the word. But somewhere in the vast expanse of the Cosmos, they lost their way and were never able to meet each other.'*

Ted and Karen couldn't forget the woman who had named their boy. They tried to contact her a few months after Michael was born but the sky crashed on them when they heard the news from Becky Ives. Teresa had a miscarriage and lost the child to fate. *'A child who was named by the Wheelers even before her birth.'* It broke their heart, but they still attempted reaching out to Teresa. Then destiny put another nail on Teresa Ives' coffin. She had apparently lost her mind and continued claiming that the child was stolen from her and was alive.

She blamed the lab and dragged the lead scientist all the way to court but lost the case in the end. A few months down the line, a newspaper article hammered the final nail on Teresa Ives' coffin. She had started using drugs to overcome the loss of her child and finally, like all junkies, she overdosed one day and went into a coma. Karen came home weeping that day and threw the flower vase on the ground, smashing it into pieces. The name of Teresa Ives became a taboo in Wheeler Residence. The pain was too much, and the couple decided to bury their past.

Ted assessed the flower vase carefully under the light. He still couldn't figure out why he had gathered the broken pieces and painstakingly joined them using gum. It took him the better part of a year, but he managed to restore the entire vase just like how the original one had looked. Karen said that Ted did it out of boredom, but he always thought that he did it because of a promise. *'A promise made by Karen Wheeler on behalf of the entire Wheeler family to the most cheerful and lively person they had ever met, a commitment made to the woman who had named Mike even before he was born.'*

Ted slowly went out of the room and placed the flower vase on the center table. He would tell Karen to put some flowers in the vase tomorrow. Teresa loved sunflowers, maybe it was time to visit her one more time. Ted took off his glasses and started cleaning it with a flannel, *'The child may be gone, but her soul is traveling at the speed of light through the eternal Cosmos. She'll always have a shelter to rest when she needs it.'*

Suddenly Ted heard an unusual sound outside. A few seconds later his ears were able to identify the growl of a V8 engine. It was strange, only a few people they knew owned cars with an engine like that. Ted went to the door and opened it a fraction of a second after the doorbell rang. Then he promptly jumped back and fell inside the room as if he had seen a spirit.

The Episode continues after the break with 'Act II: Yama: The God of Death.'

9. E3: Pantheon - Act II

Episode 3: Pantheon

Act II: Yama

In ancient lore, Yama is the God of death and the final judge on the destination of souls.

No one can live without his approval, no one can die either.

Murray Bauman took a sip of water and dumped the bottle on the table in front of him. That bottle was the second that day and probably the third in the entire week. Drinking water wasn't a usual activity for him because he survived purely on Russian Vodka. But tonight, he needed to keep his head clear to supervise the two fools who were about to commit the gravest mistake of their lives.

A short distance away, Nancy and Jonathan were staring at a strange looking board illuminated by a bright halogen lamp. Murray designated it as the '*Cipher Board*.' When he was working on a case, he would pin all incoming information on that board. Then, throughout the investigation, he would identify links between various elements and connect them using red strings. Initially, the board would look like a jumbled mess of red lines, but after some time, magic ensued. The lines would start overlapping one another, and new connections would be established. It was like a spider web, the center of which would reveal the perpetrator.

'You work, and you work, and slowly an image starts to appear. But it won't reveal the truth until you lock that final piece in.'

Murray was still far away from finding and fitting that final piece into the puzzle. There were gaps all over the mystery that lay on the Cipher Board at that moment. None of the occupants of the room could solve the meaning of the words that were pinned around a picture on the board. The photo belonged to a man with white hair, a man who wore expensive tuxedos and spoke in riddles.

Jonathan slowly pronounced the words that were making no sense at all, "Ascension Mechanism, Control Matrix, Inhibition Override."

He did know a few words, but they were out of context and didn't cooperate much, "Sword, Forge, Hammer, Teresa Ives, Jane Ives."

A little piece of text caught his attention, "Subject Eleven?"

A shiver went down his spine as he recalled Nancy's retelling of the night when a demon unleashed itself in this world to defend her little brother from death. Neither Nancy nor Jonathan were present to witness the act, but they heard the gruesome details from Hopper. In reality, Jonathan wasn't afraid of the monster called Subject Eleven, he was terrified of losing his brother's savior to her fate.

A short distance away, Nancy was telling the story of Eleven to Murray. When she visited him for the first time, she omitted the part about the relationship between Mike and Eleven from the story. But this time, she was confident that Murray was on their side and needed to know the truth. Half an hour later, Murray connected two points on the board with red string. A red line joined Eleven with Mike Wheeler and formed a curious chain.

'Martin Brenner - Ascension Mechanism - Subject Eleven - Mike Wheeler.'

Then once Murray learned about the tragedy that had taken place on the night of the Snowball, he connected another string to the board. Mike Wheeler was tied to Martin Brenner and completed a terrible circle of fate. Subject Eleven was at the center of it. Nancy was having a hard time figuring out the connections. Martin was probably trying to retrieve Eleven, but it still didn't make any sense why the man was trying to murder Mike instead of simply capturing his asset.

Murray sighed, "Start with this."

He handed Nancy a file. It had gone yellow with age, and the corners of the flap were no longer aligned to the edges. She picked the file up and noticed the name, *'Teresa Ives.'* She opened the file and immediately pulled it closer to take a better look. On the top of the stack, there was a picture of a woman with dark golden hair and a mysterious pair of eyes.

"Interesting, isn't she? That woman kicked Martin so far in the teeth that he had to borrow fangs. Whatever she did back then tripped a set of dominoes that nearly ended project MkUltra. Teresa Ives is the most courageous woman I have ever met in my life." Murray raised a

toast.

Nancy muttered to herself, "No. It's not that. She seems familiar for some reason. Jonathan?"

Jonathan was taking photographs of the Cipher Board, he replied without looking, "Haven't seen her. Must be your imagination."

"NO. I don't forget a face that easy. Something about her, a long time ago." Nancy sighed and closed her eyes. She could visualize Terry Ives smiling at her from some unknown edge of her consciousness. She had never seen that woman in her entire lifetime, so she was perplexed by the strange signal coming from her subconscious.

Murray spoke calmly, "Martin did a number on her. She's still alive, but it would be better if she were dead. Martin abducted her infant daughter, ran experiments on the girl and probably killed her. When Teresa went after him to find her daughter, that animal put her in a coma."

Nancy gritted her teeth in frustration. Initially, she had planned to expose that criminal and hand him over to the police. But now, she wanted to pull the trigger the moment she saw Martin Brenner. She wasn't a murderer, but something inside her kept reminding her that in all probabilities, she would not get a second chance.

Murray pointed to the folder, "That's the cue for you to leave. Find Becky Ives. I always had a hunch that she knows more than she realizes. Talk to her and find me a trail."

Nancy and Jonathan stood up to leave, Murray walked them to the door and slammed it as soon as they cleared the doorway. Jonathan sighed as he remembered that some things never changed. Suddenly the door opened a fraction, a hand tossed something at them, and then the door closed again. Jonathan instinctively snatched a keyring from the air. A raspy voice grumbled behind the closed door, "Leave your piece of junk and take my car. A good journalist must beat the speed of rumor to become great."

A few hours later, a black Chevrolet Chevelle cruised into a sleepy lane somewhere not far from the town of Hawkins, Indiana. Jonathan

stopped the car beside the sidewalk. They climbed out and made their way to a small house and pressed the bell. A minute later the door opened a fraction, "We don't need insurance."

"Wait, please. We are not here to sell insurance." Nancy spoke sincerely.

"Then what the hell are you here for?"

"We're here to speak to Teresa Ives."

The door closed and two moments later it opened, and a slender woman walked out, "Like I keep telling everybody, you are five years too late."

Nancy wasn't going to surrender that easy, "We know, but it's about something else. We need to find a man."

"What man?"

"Martin Brenner."

The woman recoiled as if Nancy had spat on her face and then she went back inside and slammed the door on their face.

"Get the fuck out, or I'll call the police," the finality was evident in her voice.

Nancy raised her voice, "Please. That monster is trying to kill my little brother. He won't stop unless we stop him. PLEASE HELP US FIND HIM."

There were no responses from the inside. The woman was probably dialing the police. Nancy was about to bang the door when she heard the latch slipping from its location. Then the door slowly opened by itself to reveal an empty corridor. Nancy was still trying to find the woman when she ran out of a room and immediately stopped dead in her tracks.

"YOU TOO?" Her eyes were about to fall out of their sockets.

"Me too what?"

"You... didn't open the latch?"

Ten minutes later Nancy and Jonathan were sitting in a room with Teresa and Becky Ives. Jonathan was observing the room while Nancy was staring at Teresa's face with intense concentration.

Becky spoke, "You can clearly see that she's gonna be of no help."

Teresa kept staring at the void in front of her while mumbling something incoherent. A lifetime ago a man named Martin Brenner had abducted her newborn and then electrocuted her brain when she went after the man to find her daughter. Since then she had led a life of absolute agony and suffering. She was stuck in a never-ending loop where her mind would keep playing a recording of her final attempt to find her daughter, over and over again. She was completely paralyzed and couldn't respond to external stimuli.

Nancy responded, "I have seen her before. I'm sure of it. I don't know where, but I remember the deep black eyes and a beautiful smile."

Becky just shrugged and picked up the photo that Jonathan had given her earlier. She steeled her jaw and handed the picture back to Jonathan, "That monster took everything from my sister. He stole her child, fried her brain and turned her into a fucking vegetable. I have no clue how you remember her smile. She stopped smiling decades ago."

"We're sorry. We know what that monster did. We just want to stop him before he hurts anyone else."

Becky grimaced, "I don't have any more information. Why don't you come back tomorrow? I am going to clean some rooms today. I'll see if I find anything."

Nancy wrote their names on a piece of paper, added the phone number of the hotel they were staying in and held it in her palms. Becky picked up the paper and then promptly furrowed her eyebrows, "Wheeler?"

"Yes, that's my name. Nancy Wheeler."

"What's your brother's name?"

"What?"

"The boy who Martin is after, what's his name?"

"Mike. Michael Wheeler."

Becky's eyes suddenly alighted with hope, "I'll be damned. Miracles do happen."

Nancy was still confused. Becky just nodded her head and smiled, "I have no time today. It's a long story. Why don't you come back first thing in the morning tomorrow? I promise I'll tell you the entire story."

"But..."

"Today is an extraordinary day for my sister and me. I have to leave now to get a few things. Come back tomorrow Nancy."

Becky smiled absently, thinking, *'Teresa's prophecy is coming true at last.'*

Nancy and Jonathan left the house and walked towards the car as the door slowly closed behind them. They were feeling disheartened, but they still had a chance tomorrow. They drove to the library and spent the entire afternoon looking for evidence. They located some articles but nothing that revealed any significant clue. After a few hours, they went out to grab some lunch. They were waiting at the sidewalk for the signal to turn green. Nancy was looking at the oncoming traffic when she noticed a sleek looking black sedan that stopped near them as the signal turned red. Jonathan glanced and Nancy and laughed, "Our car is way faster. I don't know how Murray got hold of a beast like that, but I bet I can outrun that car in ten seconds flat."

Nancy just smiled at Jonathan as they crossed the road, *'He can do it,'* she thought, *'He's an awesome driver.'*

After lunch, they decided to return to the hotel. Sometime later, Jonathan drove the car to the portico and then handed the keys to the valet. It was already late, and a sliver of a moon shone in the sky. They were about to enter the hotel when a small boy suddenly jumped from behind a pillar, pointed a toy gun at them and shouted,

"HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE 'EM."

The boy stabbed the air in front of him with the gun a few times as if he was shooting at some dreaded criminals. Jonathan feigned a fake scare, leaped back a few feet and made a painful face as the boy proceeded to make sounds that resembled gunshots. A few seconds later the boy's mother appeared and dragged him away while smiling apologetically to them. Jonathan grinned at the boy and then he looked back at Nancy and quickly ran to her. She was standing a few feet behind and was apparently frozen to the spot. Her eyes were unfocused, and her mouth sagged as if she had just beheld something remarkable. Jonathan reached her and clutched her arm tightly, "Nancy, Nance... NANCE!"

She came out of the trance and started sprinting towards the hotel reception. Jonathan ran after her and requested her to stop, but Nancy dashed through the gate before the security could stop her, "She... was... at... our... house," Nancy was panting as she shouted the words.

She reached the reception and stopped, "I don't know how I know, but she was at our house when I was a kid. I remember scaring her like that boy, I remember her eyes and her smile. TERESA IVES was at our house, Jonathan. And I want to know why."

Nancy went to the receptionist to call her parents, she needed to know the truth. The receptionist was busy with a telephone receiver, he was pressing the cradle quickly to get a signal, "Hello, hello. This is..."

He looked at Nancy and sighed in the mouthpiece, "Sir, my name is not Becky. If you mean Rebecca, she is out of off..."

Nancy snatched the phone from the receptionist and pressed it against her ears as hard as she could, there was silence, but then she heard something. She detected raspy breathing and then a few moments later heard someone moaning in pain, then the receiver fell from her hand as she listened to a calm and soothing voice, "Find Eleven's Control Matrix."

Nancy connected the dots immediately, '*Control Matrix, Eleven, Painful*

moaning,' and a voice that summoned 'Becky.'

'Martin Brenner has returned to his past to eliminate loose ends!'

Nancy seized Jonathan's arm and started running towards the doorway. Like everyone in the hotel, Jonathan was also bewildered, "Nancy! Whoa."

"DRIVE!" Nancy shouted as she ran towards the car with Jonathan.

"Where are we going?"

"To save Eleven's family."

A few minutes later, a Chevy Chevelle shot through the main gate of the hotel and drove into the night. Jonathan had never driven so fast as he was driving that night. He remembered Hopper once telling him that he could drive without touching the brake, and thought '*Crazy bastard,*' to himself.

Nancy was studying a map with a flashlight and giving him instructions. Jonathan was following them as best as he could, but basically, he was driving purely on instinct. The Chevy Chevelle was a fast car, but Murray had done something to the V8, and now it growled like a hound that had halfway returned to the wild. They kept running red lights, but not a single police car came after them.

'Damn,' Jonathan thought, and shouted at Nancy over the noise, "I think we should call the Police."

Nancy responded without raising her head, "There's no time. He's already inside the house."

Jonathan was about to take a corner when the rear tires slipped, and the car drifted onto the sidewalk. He watched in rapt horror as the car rammed a set of garbage bins and slid towards a woman who was walking her dog. The woman disappeared from the field of view as Jonathan released the brake, swerved the wheel and pressed the gas as hard as he could. The car somehow straightened out and they were back on the road a moment later. Jonathan glanced at the rear-view mirror and spotted the woman as she was getting up, apparently unharmed. He was sweating after some time. It was not only from the

strain of driving a monster car like a maniac at night, but the fuel gauge was slowly moving towards the red line. They had planned to refuel the next morning before visiting Teresa.

"Here, TURN RIGHT."

"HOLD ON," Jonathan yelled as he yanked the wheel to the right, and the car fishtailed into a narrow lane, barely missing a black sedan coming off the road. It was the same car that had waited at the signal when they were crossing the street. Nancy glanced and caught a glimpse of the passengers sitting in the vehicle. One was an indistinctive figure with a head full of white hair, and he was wearing a tuxedo. Nancy had a gun with her but gritted her teeth in frustration as she made her choice. Teresa and Becky came first.

"We're running out of time, DRIVE FASTER."

Whatever Martin came to find had already been retrieved. Nancy felt a sinking feeling inside her stomach. A few minutes later, Jonathan slammed the brake and crashed the car into a post box at the edge of the sidewalk. They left the car and started running towards the door to the Ives' Residence. In a few seconds, they reached the door and Jonathan crashed into it and immediately fell indoors as it gave away. The latch was shot off, and the door was being held in place by nothing but splinters. Nancy rushed in behind Jonathan and screamed as soon as she reached the room where they had met Teresa that morning.

Becky was lying in a pool of blood, and the telephone receiver was resting beside her head. Beside her motionless body, Teresa sat on her chair, but her head sagged unnaturally to one side. There was a violet colored wound on her forehead from which blood kept trickling into a pool on the ground. Broken pieces of a pitcher were scattered all over the floor. Apparently, Martin had severely wounded Teresa with a flower vase and shot Becky as she was trying to call Nancy. Nancy roared, "Attacking defenseless women, that bastard!"

There was a table in front of Teresa. Nancy looked at the table and nearly lost her balance. A small birthday cake lied on the surface, and a slice was missing from one side. The slice left out some letters, and they indicated a horrible tragedy. The text read '*Jane Eleven Iv...*'

The cipher board came alive in front of Nancy's eyes. Teresa didn't miscarry as the world had believed, she named her daughter Jane even before she was born and brought her into this world. Martin kidnapped the newborn at the time of delivery, rechristened the child '*Subject Eleven*,' and trained her to become his '*Sword*.' But in contrary to what Murray had thought, the child didn't die from the experiment named '*Ascension Mechanism*.' Jane Eleven Ives survived, and thirteen years later, she managed to run away from the monster and into the arms of Nancy's little brother Mike Wheeler who sheltered her from her past. Her brother had snatched away the most powerful weapon Martin had ever forged, and that's why the monster was after his life. Martin Brenner wanted retribution from Mike Wheeler like a child who had lost his toy.

The spider web was completed now, but Nancy wished it wasn't. Apparently, Becky had somehow managed to find out about Eleven and planned to throw her sister a party to celebrate her daughter's birthday. She had chosen the perfect gift for Teresa for this extraordinary day, but fate decided to outshine her. Fate was determined to take Jane Ives away from Teresa Ives by annihilating her.

Nancy gritted her teeth, "Barb... NO MORE."

She ran to Teresa as Jonathan ran to Becky. She held her finger below Teresa's nose and exclaimed a sigh of relief, "She's alive Jonathan. Becky?"

Jonathan was grimacing beside the motionless body lying on the ground, "No pulse Nance. She's not breathing,"

He looked like as if he would throw up any moment. Abruptly he looked at the ground as if he had seen a Demogorgon, his jaw slacked, and he immediately snatched something from the floor and put in his pocket. It looked like a circular fragment of the broken flower vase. Before Nancy could ask Jonathan about what he had found, she smelled something familiar, "What the...? GAS?!"

Jonathan leaped up even before Nancy could move and rushed towards the kitchen. A few seconds later a banging noise came from that direction followed by him running into the room, "It's coming

from the kitchen. The door is locked, and I can't break it. We can't shoot it either, sparks could set it off."

"Let's get her out of the house. We'll come back for Becky. Here, help me get her up."

Jonathan and Nancy struggled to get Teresa out of the chair. She was an old woman, and she didn't weigh that much, but at the moment she was unconscious, and her body had become stiff due to long-term paralysis. They carried her out to the lawn and gently placed her on the grass. Then they turned around and ran to the house to get Becky. Jonathan ran in front, and as soon he reached the door the heavens roared, and a shockwave hit them like a hundred-ton ship coming through the fog. Nancy watched in amazement as Jonathan flew in a straight line and smashed into her. She loved adventure, but she wasn't planning on going skydiving anytime soon. She found herself hovering in the air for a moment, and then a terrifying heatwave surrounded her as she crashed into the ground. She remembered smelling burnt hair before losing consciousness.

Nancy forced her eyes open a lifetime later. Her head throbbed like hell, and her face was apparently set on fire. She focussed her eyes and recognized Jonathan groaning as he struggled to stand up. In front of her eyes, the sky was set on fire, and a rotating column of smoke carried sparks flying high into the heavens. A few minutes later Jonathan stood up, came close to Nancy and helped her to stand up too. Then they painstakingly made their way to the location where they had settled Teresa down. Both of them exhaled once they found her unhurt from the blast. They lifted her up and gently carried her towards the car instead of waiting for emergency service. It was not safe to stay there anymore. Eventually, Martin would discover that Teresa Ives's charred remains had not been found in the wreckage and would come after her again. They turned back one last time to witness the burning pyre of Becky Ives, a woman who had believed in justice. Then their chariot rode into the night in search of salvation.

Jonathan placed a note on the counter and picked up the first aid kit without saying a single word. He was looking like a scarecrow that had somehow been scorched by fire, but the old shopkeeper didn't provoke further. Jonathan's watch stopped working since the

explosion, so he asked for the time.

"Stupid clock is stuck at 10.59 from god knows when. Got it serviced twice, keeps on breaking down. I do reckon it tells the correct time twice a day." The shopkeeper swallowed as Jonathan glared at him and walked towards the door.

Just before leaving the store, he noticed a man who was trying to fix a statue in the corner of the store. Jonathan knew about the figure, he had read about it in history class. *'Lady Justice – The personification of the moral force in the Judicial System.'* He smirked sardonically at the man who was trying to balance the weigh scale attached to the left arm of the statue.

"Justice? Bullshit!" Jonathan slammed the door behind him. He didn't notice the weighing scales coming to balance a moment after he left the store.

Nancy finished refueling the vehicle as Jonathan returned with the supplies. They drove a distance away, stopped the car and then used the first aid to stop the bleeding that was ruining Teresa Ives' features. They did a commendable job under the circumstances, but there was probably a crack in her skull, and blood kept slowly leaking out through the dressing. Nancy had already made her choice, "Let's take her to Hawkins. It's a few hours away, but we have almost stopped the bleeding. We'll get someone to help her, and Martin won't show his face. Not with both Hopper and Murray around."

Jonathan nodded absently as he turned the ignition key, "Nance. You need to see something."

"On the way, there's no time."

"No," Jonathan took out a disc from his pocket and handed it over to Nancy. The disc had four words written on it.

'Michael Wheeler.'

'Jane Ives.'

Nancy closed her eyes as she found the proof that shattered all her

doubts once and for all. She wasn't dreaming, Teresa Ives had somehow been involved with her family for over a decade. Nancy always had an eye for details and she could easily identify the owner of the hand that had written the second name on the broken flower vase.

Karen Wheeler had written the name of Jane Ives on that vase. And the second handwriting probably belonged to Teresa.

Nancy needed to find the truth. She made a promise to the unconscious woman, "We're sorry we couldn't save your sister Teresa. But we'll save you. We'll return you to your daughter."

'And to my parents, whatever that means,' Nancy thought absently as she gently secured Teresa in the seat and held her tightly to brace against the bumps on the road.

"Let's take her home before she bleeds to death."

Jonathan smoothly shifted car to first gear and pressed the gas. For the first time in life, he decided to drive the car without touching the brakes, just like how Hopper had taught him a few years back.

The Episode continues after the break with 'Asclepius – The God of healing.'

10. E3: Pantheon - Act III

Episode III: Pantheon

Act III: Asclepius

According to the legends, Asclepius was the deity who could heal wounds that were even beyond the reach of other Gods.

His legacy, the staff of Asclepius remains a symbol of heroes who fight death to this day.

Scott Clarke entered the classroom precisely as the minute's hand touched twelve. He had never been late to his class, and that discipline was something he desperately wanted to teach his students. Quickly, he ran his eyes around the classroom and noticed the absence of a few students. Earlier that day, Jim Hopper had requested him to keep an eye on his niece who was new in town and had no friends. Scott felt worried and decided to go search for Jane but stopped himself as he reached the door. Just a few hours ago he had seen her hanging around with Mike and his gang in the cafeteria. He smiled to himself as he realized that Jane had already made new friends in such a short time. Mike and his band were the best students in Scott's class, and he was sure that they would take good care of Jane.

He would have a talk with the boys regarding punctuality later, but for now, he decided to start teaching. Something still felt odd about the girl, but he couldn't put his finger on it. So, he did the next best thing he could do under the circumstances. He placed his finger on a small patch of color on a large globe, "Class, today we're going to learn about the legacy of the Swedish scientist, Alfred Bernhard Nobel..."

Scott had never visited Sweden, but someone very close to him had loved that country. Maybe someday he would get the chance to meet Mike's cousin Eleanor again and learn why that girl disliked her motherland so much.

Max fished inside her bag and took out a small paper clip, straightened it out and inserted the tip into the latch. The others were staring at her with complete attention, they wanted to glimpse the magic. Eleven could've easily opened the lock by turning the latch from inside the room with her powers, but she decided to give Max a chance. Hopper had asked her to believe in other's abilities and provide them with an opportunity to shine, it was something that friends were supposed to do. The lock opened a few seconds later, and the gang piled into the room. Lucas locked it from inside and placed a chair under the latch to prevent anyone from opening it with or without a key. Then they switched the lights on and sat on the floor.

Scientists have been researching human emotions for a very long time. Sometime during the 20th century, they classified emotions into six fundamental elements; happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. The experts concluded that humans learned these emotions during early childhood and carried the learning throughout their lives. But it wasn't applicable to a girl named Eleven. Jane 'Eleven' Ives was kidnapped by a psychopath immediately after birth and then imprisoned in a lab where she was only allowed to learn one emotion; anger. She was being forged into a weapon, and she didn't need to learn any other sentiment. Thirteen years later she somehow managed to escape the lab and run into the embrace of a boy named Mike Wheeler who became her greatest teacher.

Within the following few days, she experienced new emotions. She learned happiness when the boy gave her a new name to help her escape from her past. She became surprised when the boy came back to rescue her after locking her in a wardrobe to hide her from his mother. She learned sadness when the boy yelled at her for letting his friend get killed at the quarry. She felt disgusted when the boy pressed his lips against hers in the gym.

But right then she felt another strange emotion, something scientists could never define. It made her head spin and heart beat faster as it let loose a bunch of butterflies in her stomach. She didn't know what it meant, but she grinned like a fool because she liked the strange and disgusting thing that the boy did. A lifetime later, she learned what that emotion was when the boy hugged her and begged her to never

leave him again. Mike Wheeler had shown Eleven how to Love, and it was the most powerful emotion in existence. But it wasn't the first emotion that evolved in animals.

Just before touching his lips to hers, Mike had asked Eleven to go to the Snowball with him. She realized that it was a question in the form of a statement, but it took her a lifetime to decipher the real meaning. Once she grasped the truth, she was ready to confront the most powerful monsters to answer the question that Mike had asked her, *'Do you want to spend your life with me, Eleven?'*

She did, and she wanted to blow him away by going to the Snowball with him.

But just a month before the Snowball, destiny decided that Eleven's lessons were completed and decided to return her to the void. On that fateful night, Eleven was forced to use the final fragments of her power to close the interdimensional portal which she had opened earlier and nearly died as a consequence. Subsequently, she learned the true nature of the most fundamental of all emotions, *'Fear.'* She was afraid that if she died before answering the question, then Mike would lose his sanity trying to find the answer in the darkness. She was nearly dead when Hopper brought her cold and lifeless body to Mike. Her mind was gone at that point, but her soul still endured to honor her last wish. Eleven's subconscious borrowed her psionic powers to draw Mike's soul in itself and proceeded to show him her memories. They appeared as bright fireflies encircling his enigma in a vast sea of darkness. Mike touched the fireflies one by one and lived through Eleven's memories that she gained with him. Then he found his answer, *'See Mike? You have taught me so much, and I am happy to be with you for as long as I did. I'd love to go to the Snowball with you. This year, the next and a lifetime after that. But I have to go away to save you. Please forgive me.'*

Then she decided to embrace eternity. But Eleven underestimated the true nature of love. It was an emotion that could overcome even the most ancient of all feelings. Fear never had a chance. Mike stood his ground at the gates of hell and challenged death to a rematch. He needed more information to figure out a way to save Eleven, so he pulled every firefly to his soul and witnessed every moment of Eleven's life. He was with Eleven through every nanosecond of time

since the day she was born till the moment she was going to die. Then he found a way to bring her back from the darkness. Mike was thrilled to have Eleven back in his life because he could finally give her the life she deserved. Then one night he woke up sweating and screaming as he witnessed a vision where a man tested Eleven's pain tolerance using various techniques.

Mike never let anyone know what he was going through since that terrible night. When he lived all thirteen years of Eleven's life in one instant, his mind was unable to process such a massive amount of information and locked them away into the deepest depths of his heart. The memories would often get triggered and bestow upon Mike a replay of Eleven's past. The visions pushed him into a constant state of anxiety and depression. After all, who would want to see the love of his life getting electrocuted by a taser, or being locked in isolation for days, or being strapped to a chair and then exposed to horrors that were impossible to imagine, over and over again?

The worst part was that Mike was not just witnessing them, he was genuinely living Eleven's memories and dying in her suffering because he couldn't do anything to help her. The phenomenon was termed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it was slowly driving him to insanity even though the trauma belonged to someone else. Eleven had no idea what was happening to Mike, but she felt his inner turmoil and confronted him in the auditorium. And now they were sitting face to face in a room, and Mike was about to confess the night of the fireflies. He was scared shitless because he couldn't imagine what the truth might do to the girl who had fought death to save him.

Mike and Eleven were sitting in the radio room surrounded by the party. They needed their friends to make through the confession, and these four were the best the world had to offer.

Mike whispered, "Eleven. I'll tell you everything. But first, you have to make a promise."

Eleven frowned but nodded, "Yes."

"Promise me that you'll let me handle it."

"Mike...."

"No. This is my burden to bear, and I did it to save you. I'll do it a thousand times over if I have to."

The resolve in his voice shocked everyone.

"Okay. I promise."

Mike took a deep breath and spoke, "Do you remember the night you closed the gate?"

Eleven looked away from Mike's eyes, "I remember closing the gate. I remember the pain and the darkness."

Mike held Eleven's chin and turned her face towards him, "Then?"

"Then I heard you calling to me. I saw you. Somewhere in the dark. You were scared, and you were crying. You wanted to save me."

Mike nodded, "I saved you. Do you know how?"

"I remember you showing me the reason to live. I lived so that you could keep your promise to take me to the Snowball."

"Is that the Promise I made to you?" Mike sighed.

'El, you should already know what that promise means to both of us.'

Eleven smiled brightly, "No. You promised that you'll make my dreams come true. And I said that we'll do it together."

'I know, Mike.'

The occupants in the room clapped their hands and cheered for them. It was marvelous to comprehend how much Mike really cared for Eleven. But did he care a little too much? What happened to him while he was absorbed in Eleven's memories?

Mike spoke quietly, "Eleven. In that darkness, I was surrounded by millions of bright fireflies that you somehow created using your powers. and when I touched them, I lived your life."

There was pin-drop silence in the room, and then a cacophony of voices rang the air, "What the hell?"

"You son of a bitch. What have you done with Mike?"

"You did what? Are you on drugs?"

"What did you see Mike?" Will was the only one who understood the gravity of the situation. He had been in that lab and was well aware of the horrors that were contained within its pristine walls.

"She showed me her memories since the day we found her till the moment she closed the gate."

Dustin was curious about this new power, "Why did she do that?"

Mike swallowed bile as he fought hard to utter the next words, "She wanted to show me what I meant to her before she died. But I managed to view a few memories that I was not supposed to see."

Eleven's eyes went wide with shock, "The coke can! That's how you know. I'm so sorry Mike."

Max was curious, "Coke can? What about the coke can?"

Mike closed his eyes, "Back in the lab, she was being trained to use her powers. They ordered her to crush a can of coke with her mind, and they'd torture her till she could do it. They'd hit her right below the ribcage. It was horrible, the pain was unbearable, and she'd often throw up. But the men wouldn't stop till she did it. I saw it firsthand."

The others in the room wanted to cover their ears as if Mike was scratching a blackboard with his nails. Eleven kept sobbing silently not because of her pain, but because she realized what Mike was going through. It must have put him through immense pain to witness that memory.

"El, look at me," the boy who sheltered her in her greatest hour of need spoke calmly, "It's not those memories that scare me. It's the ones that I haven't seen yet. I reached out to every firefly in the void to find the answer. And that's how I saved you. I have lived your

entire life, Eleven."

Mike paused a moment for the realization to kick into others' faces and then dropped the hammer, "I don't remember them all right now. But sometimes I see these visions of her past. Today at the gym when I passed out, I was inside one. I've been having these visions quite often. And even if it takes a lifetime, I have to see all of them to save her."

Only one person in the group noticed the oddity of the last sentence. What did Mike mean, *'To save her?'* What was he searching for?

"13 Years equals 156 Months, which in turn equals 678 Weeks. Multiply that with seven, and we get 4,745 Days. Now if we again multiply by twenty-four, we get 113,880 Hours. If you see a vision of say one hour per day, then you'd need... FUCK DUDE!" Dustin cursed as he quickly did the math in his mind.

Eleven covered her mouth with her palms, "Oh Mike! I wish we never met. If you didn't find me, then all of this would never happen."

Mike wanted to bump his fist on Eleven's head, *'Never met you? Are you crazy?'* He needed to tell Eleven that it wasn't her fault. Whatever Mike was going through was by his choice, and he couldn't let Eleven blame herself. *'How to convince her?'*

"Wait. If you have seen all of her memories, then did you see her when she was nak..."

"SHUT UP, DUSTIN!" Max moved towards Eleven and hugged her as she kept crying.

A figure stood up from the group, went to Eleven and squatted down in front of her, "Hey, El."

Eleven looked at the figure with confusion, wondering *'Why is he smiling?'*

A group of scientists did some exciting research on the psychological conditioning of individuals who had suffered from abuse during their childhood. No one knew whether they were the same group of

scientists who did the useless research on human emotions, but this time their findings were unquestionable. Children who were exposed to family feuds and abusive behavior from their parents developed an uncanny ability to read human emotions and predicting outcomes. They learned this ability out of necessity. They needed to guess when a smile turned into a frown, or when a hand bearing gifts left a mark on their cheek so that they could take cover in time. In a distinct sleepy town named Hawkins, a socially awkward boy had graduated in this field with distinction. He was rightfully given the title '*The Cleric*' by his friends because he could read tragedy better than anyone with decades worth of medical knowledge backing them up. He also knew how to deal with them because he had been doing it since forever.

Will spoke with confidence, "You know, both of you are blaming yourselves for the same thing. Eleven, you can't forgive yourself because you think your past is hurting Mike. And Mike, you're blaming yourself because you couldn't save her when she was imprisoned in the lab."

The most effective way to find the wound was to hit the patient with the truth as soon as possible. Mike and Eleven looked away from each other.

'Test results are positive,' Will thought.

"It'd be so nice if Eleven was never imprisoned in the lab." Will gave a hearty laugh.

Step one; lay down the first alternative; "Now think. Eleven? If you were never imprisoned in the lab, do you think you could have still found Mike in the woods on that night?"

Step two; present the second alternative; "Mike? If Eleven was never imprisoned in the lab, do you think you could've saved her that night? How many girls have run into your arms in the last five years?"

Both Mike and Eleven shivered as the words entered their ears. They have never heard such blunt statements regarding their past. Will nodded, *'It's working,'* he thought.

'Now list all alternatives.'

He leaned forward, "Eleven's past is what connects you two, and all of us together."

He paused for a moment to look at Mike and Eleven's faces and started hammering them with words, "If she didn't have her past, then there would be no tents made of blankets, there would be no Eggos, there would be no cycle rides, there would be no lazy boy, there would be no Demogorgon, there would be no adventure, there would be no kisses, there would be no snowball, there would be no Mad Max, Hopper would never have a daughter, my mom would be back with my dad, Jonathan would never find Nancy, Steve would remain the absolute douchebag, Dustin would never get to dance with a girl, Troy would beat the shit out all of us, there would be no PROMISES TO KEEP OR BREAK."

Will didn't let them recover. He kept speaking in a calm voice, "Mike Wheeler and his gang of losers would keep playing D&D in his basement while Eleven, the girl with magic powers would hang out with cool guys like Troy and they would never meet. You want a future like that?"

Mike and Eleven stared at each other, Lucas kept looking at Max while Dustin absently kept chewing a bar of Nougat.

'Diagnosis complete. Mike and Eleven found each other because of her past, no matter how bad it was.' Will thought and smiled absently, *'It's time to administer the cure.'*

Will clapped his hands to bring attention to himself and continued, "You guys are together because of a promise. And that oath has not only helped you to but all of us. Did you guys know that Mom was planning to patch up with Lonnie before I disappeared? Do you guys realize that Max has found a place where she can be free from Billy? Dustin has found a stupid sense of humor, but we're okay with him. Bob could finally become a hero. And you two know that you have found your best friends."

Will let out a sigh and continued, "Eleven, your past has changed all of our lives, and I'd rather return to the upside down than go back to

my old life. What about you all?"

The whole gang nodded in unison. Will smiled and continued, "I'm sure you two can get through this just like everything else that happened. But this time you two are not alone. We are here to help you."

Mike and Eleven stared at each other and beamed. Will was right. If her tragedy did not take place, they would never have found each other, and it was worth every nightmare that came with it. They would fight this together, and this time, they had the unconditional support of the legendary vanguards from the Dungeons and Dragons.

Before Eleven could say anything, Will gently placed a hand on her shoulder, "Whatever Mike is going through, you can help him, Eleven. I believe he is searching for a particular memory from your past. Something that will answer a crucial question. Mike?"

Mike tried to answer, but his tongue was stuck firmly in its place and wouldn't move an inch. He had no clue how Will found out the truth. It was as if he really had *Truesight*. Eleven looked into Mike's eyes and swallowed. She finally understood what he was really searching for.

Mike wanted to know when the innocent child named Jane Ives was transformed into a weapon called Subject Eleven, an armament without a soul, a blade that could cut through flesh and bone like paper, *a sword that could never be sheathed*. Today was not about Mike's confession, it was always about her.

Eleven spoke nervously, "On the day of the Snowball, Mike didn't get into an accident. Some men tried to kill him."

Dustin swallowed part of the nougat's wrapper as Lucas slapped his back in frustration. Max was shocked, she screamed, "WHAT?"

"They were sent by Papa. The man you saw back in the corridor that day." Eleven clenched her fist.

The gang was too shocked to react, so Eleven continued, "I found Mike just before one of the men shot him. I don't remember what

happened, but when I woke up, I saw the men. They were..." Eleven swallowed, "...Dead. And one of them looked..."

She couldn't finish the sentence. One of the men had his lower jaw rotated beyond the face, and part of his spine was surgically destroyed by some ungodly force. The other men had his gun snatched away from his hand by the same supernatural power, and he was killed with his own gun without any mercy. It was the act of the devil itself.

Eleven started crying hysterically, "I don't remember anything. It's... it's like back in the lab. Papa would do these tests. He'd put me to sleep, and when I woke up, there would be bodies everywhere. They looked so horrible, torn from limb to limb, spines taken out of the body, heads blown up. I..."

She couldn't finish the sentence, voices shouted in the air.

"That son of a bitch. Hope that Demogorgon ate his balls." Dustin squeezed the nougat into mush.

"Why didn't you kill him when he did these? He isn't really your dad, is he?" Lucas went straight to the point.

Will was running his hands on Eleven's back and consoling her. Eleven let out a silent gasp when she realized that they didn't care about the monster at all. They didn't try to run away from her like others did, and they didn't scream in fear. Their eyes did not show horror or hate, but they expressed an unstoppable resolve. She knew only another person who demonstrated the same determination, it was the boy who had brought her back from her rampage that day at the cost of his life. A drop of tear left her eye as she smiled through her grief.

'Friends.'

Mike nudged Eleven slightly, "Tell them the next part."

"Mike? I..."

Mike cleared his throat, "Guys. Hopper told me what Eleven did after that. Go on El."

Eleven placed his hand on Mike's thigh, "The bullet cut his femoral artery. He lost too much blood, and his heart stopped."

The others were looking at Mike as if he was a ghost. Dustin drew a cross in the air and prayed. Mike shouted, "I'm not dead you asshole!"

Eleven continued, "I bound his artery using my powers. Then I squeezed his heart and beat it to a rhythm. Once it started beating normally, I held the artery until Hopper got him to the hospital."

Four jaws were nearly dislocated that day. They knew that Eleven could lift things with her power, but this was at an entirely different level. Even the Jedi in Star Wars couldn't pull off something as remarkable as what this fourteen-year-old child had done that day. *The truth was indeed stranger than fiction.*

Dustin lifted his shirt and pointed at an old mark, "Can you make this disappear? It's an old battle wound."

Lucas snickered at him, "It's a stretch mark you fat cow. She's not a veterinarian."

Then, as usual, they started arguing about who looked more like an animal. But Will didn't lose his head, he needed the answer, "How did your Papa make you do these things?"

"He used something called a Control Matrix." Mike groaned, he had figured it out from the last vision he had.

Eleven jerked her head towards Mike, "You know?"

"Just a glimpse. It was the day you were brought into Hawkins."

Lucas sprang up and started pacing the room, "What's a control matrix? A video game?"

Mike replied, "Not sure. It looked like a paper with some diagrams. Before I could see it properly, I was pulled out from the vision. The woman who was showing it to Eleven looked as if she was going to mur..." 'Shit' "... unleash her powers when she saw heard the instructions."

"Eleven. Do you remember anything about this matrix?" Lucas was not going to let go.

Eleven shook her head sideways in frustration, "I don't remember. Whenever I try, I get a massive headache until I pass out. Something is not allowing me to remember the matrix."

Dustin licked his lips, "Brain implants?"

Mike exhaled, "No clue. The vision stopped before I could see how the damn thing worked. I can't trigger these visions. They come to me when they feel like it."

Will thought for a minute and had an idea, "We have to go back to the lab."

"Fuck no." Dustin was out of nougats, and he was pissed off.

Will grimaced, "You think I want to go back there? After all that happened? But we must trigger the vision. Mike said that the last sight was right before she came to Hawkins. We have to find what this Control Matrix is before that man comes for her. WE HAVE TO DO IT FOR ELEVEN."

Lucas came and sat beside Dustin, they glared at each other for a few seconds and nodded. Max smiled at Eleven, "We'll do it for you."

Mike's jaw couldn't handle the shock, so it made a dash towards the floor, *'Crazy bastard, the lot of them.'*

But he laughed, "Yes. We'll go back to that hellhole. You guys would kill for an opportunity to see me drooling and acting like a brain-dead vegetable. But not today. We're too tired, right guys?"

He winked at the gang. They all knew about Eleven's surprise birthday party, and they had toiled for weeks to make it a grand one. They smirked back at him. Eleven was oblivious because she was thinking about the diagrams. Suddenly there was sound from the door. Someone was turning a key, and only one person had the key to the radio room.

"Hold on," Eleven acted without hesitation. She thrust her palm and

lifted it in a smooth motion as all of them rose to the ceiling enforced by her incredible power that turned the gravity off for them. Once they reached the top and laid with their backs on the ceiling, she removed the chair with a mental pull. The door opened a moment later, and a bald head walked in and closed the door behind him. Then the person locked the door and made his way to the desk.

Ever since Jim Hoppers' niece had walked in through the door that morning, a strange sensation had crept inside Scott Clarke's heart and was not going away. In fact, he was so distracted that when he was taking attendance, he had called out Eleanor instead of Jane by mistake. It didn't make any sense to him, but he knew where a possible clue might be hidden. Scott opened the drawer and brought an old envelope. He grimaced as he recalled the history behind the letter hidden away inside the innocent-looking brown paper. Gently removing the flap, he took out the letter and carefully laid it on the table under the light. It was a rather simple letter, a sort of Last Will and Testament of a man who had disappeared from the world a year back. He tapped his finger below a line that was highlighted with red ink;

'You'll know when you see her. Her name is Eleven, and you must protect her at all costs. Look out for the nosebleed.'

"IMPOSSIBLE!"

The Episode returns after the break with Prithvi: The Goddess of the Earth.

Post-Credits: Dear readers, sorry for the long break. I'm working on a new project and it's taking a lot of my time. It's the story that took thirteen years in the making, a moment in writing but will take months in narrating. It's the story of how it all began. Coming soon to a screen near you.

11. E3: Pantheon - Act IV

Armageddon: Episode III - Pantheon

Act IV: Prithvi

'Prithvi, the Goddess of the Earth, embodies the second of the three realms of reality. She nurtures the Biosphere and preserves it from the darkness that threaten to consume all life in the cosmos. At times, she can be free flowing like the legendary River Ganges and other times, she can be immovable like a moment in time.'

Hopper inserted the key into the door of his old police wagon and unlocked it in a practiced motion. Then he opened the door and bent halfway inside the car to search for the file that he had thrown inside last night in a hurry. He found the file below the seat and picked it up. After dusting the cover, he quickly went through the pages to confirm that nothing was missing. Then he carefully placed it inside the glove compartment.

"I'm ready," an excited voice rang behind and unsettled him. He quickly closed the glove box, pulled himself from the inside of the car and turned around to face the future. Jane 'Eleven' Hopper, his adopted daughter, was standing a few feet behind him and beaming like the sun. Today was the day when she would finally be going to school, and she was overwhelmed with the possibilities. Of course, Hopper was sure that ninety percent of the excitement was reserved for the boy named Mike Wheeler who also attended the same school. He often wondered if those two had been together through all their past lives, the attachment between them was so intense that nothing else made sense.

Hopper smiled at his daughter as she came close and hugged him. She didn't notice the stiffness in his posture. He was trying his best to hide it along with the most terrible news that any person could ever give to his daughter. Last night, Eleven's biological mother had been burnt alive when her house had gone up in flames. Hopper had caught the news this morning and broke the TV before Eleven could see it herself. He was still scared shitless because he could anticipate

her reaction to the revelation. While most normal children would be destroyed by such a tragedy, Eleven would probably end up destroying the town with her psionic powers instead. Hopper had spent the last hour thinking about the various ways to communicate the truth to his daughter but came up short every time. His hope now lay with Mike Wheeler, the only person who Eleven loved as much if not more than her mother. It wasn't strange, Eleven had never known her mother until a few months ago, but she had met and fell in love with Mike Wheeler over a year back. He was the first person in this world to have sheltered Eleven against her fate and for that reason he was probably the last person who could stop Eleven from her inner demons.

'Everything rests on you, Mike. I can't handle this,' Hopper thought as he closed the door after his daughter and went around to climb into the driver's seat. Then a few seconds later, the police wagon slowly rolled onto the morning light and made its way to the town. Hopper noticed that Eleven was speaking a lot more than usual today, but he was lost in thought and could only pick up a few lines here and there.

...

...

"I will sit with Mike. Can I sit at his table?"

...

...

"... Dustin likes chocolate. I'll give him the..."

...

"I wonder how big the school is. I only saw one room last time..."

...

"... the tank..."

...

"...WATCH OUT!"

The scream brought Hopper out of his trance, and he saw a small kid right in front of the car. Time slowed down as Hopper tried to analyze the situation. From the corner of his eyes, he noticed a woman standing at the side of the road with her arms spread forward. She was definitely the mother of the kid who had run onto the road after a small stray puppy. Hopper focussed his eyes on the speedometer of the car and found the indicator at sixty. He quickly did the math in his head as he pressed the brake as hard as he could and swerved the steering wheel. The result came into his mind a fraction of a second later, *'You're not gonna make it.'*

"FUUC.." Hopper couldn't finish the curse. The car was suddenly stopped in its tracks by an invisible barrier, and he braced for the impact as his body lurched forward. A moment later, he lost his breath as the seatbelt arrested his momentum and the sudden deceleration knocked the air out of his lungs. Then everything stopped, and silence hung in the air. A second later, Hopper turned his face and glanced at his daughter to make sure she was alright. Truth to be told, he didn't need to worry because she was absolutely fine. Eleven's eyes were focussed on the road as if the world didn't exist around her. She had used her powers to stop the car, and as expected, drops of blood had started dripping down her nostril. Hopper quickly moved his arm and caught the droplets before it fell on her shirt and ruined it. He wiped his daughter's nose with his forearm and spoke gently, "Thanks. I'm sorry."

Eleven smiled at her father, "It's okay."

Hopper nodded and turned his face to observe the kid. His mother had already arrived at the spot and had picked him up in her arms. Her face showed a mix of horror, disbelief, and relief. She smiled apologetically at Hopper and quickly crossed the street to get away from her worst nightmare. Once the coast was clear, Hopper drove with complete attention and reached the school within a minute. Then they got out of the car and started making their way towards the steps.

"Hey Jim." A voice stopped them in their tracks.

Hopper turned around and waved at the man in response, "Hey Clarke."

Scott Clarke reached them and grinned at Eleven, "Hello. I am Scott, and you must be Jane."

In response, Eleven vigorously nodded her head and smiled at the man with a kind face. This man had repeatedly helped Mike and his friends in the past, and for that reason, she genuinely admired him. Now she finally got to meet him.

Hopper pressed Eleven's shoulder and formally introduced the man, "Jane, this is Scott Clarke, your science teacher."

A voice echoed inside Eleven's soul and shattered an illusion, *'Find my brother, Eleven. His name is Scott Clarke...'*

'Mr. Clarke is Scott Clarke, brother of James. My friend from the lab,' Eleven almost screamed but somehow restrained herself. She had so many questions concerning this man but realized that now was not a good time to ask them. Maybe she'd get the chance soon, but first, she needed to see Mike.

Hopper watched curiously as Eleven's expression changed in an instant as soon as he introduced Scott. Her jaw made a dash towards the ground, and her eyes were on the verge of leaving their sockets. Hopper moved his gaze towards Scott's face and observed the same expression on his face. They were looking at each other as if they had found a long-lost treasure. But Scott gained his composure a moment later and spoke in alarm, "Jim. She's got a nosebleed."

Hopper quickly took out his handkerchief and wiped the droplet of blood from Eleven's nose. Then he spoke solemnly, "She's got a medical condition Scott. It's not serious, but please look after her. If you see her bleeding, call me asap."

Scott countered, "You sure she'll be okay? Maybe you should take her back today and bring her..."

"NO!" Eleven let out a soft scream and clutched Hopper's hand tightly.

Hopper assured Scott, "She'll be okay. It's a lifelong problem. Just don't let her get stressed. No gym or sports, as we discussed."

Scott sighed, "Alright. Let's go, Jane."

Eleven wanted to hug her father but controlled herself as she remembered his instructions. To the outside world, Jane was Hopper's niece, and she couldn't display strong emotions towards him like a daughter. She merely smiled at her father and then slowly walked towards the steps with Scott. They made their way to the door, stopped for a second as Eleven turned around to look at her father, who assured her with a smile and then they disappeared into the hallway. As soon as the door closed, Hopper sighed and turned around to walk towards the car. He needed to go to his station and make some arrangements. A few days later this week, he would revisit the city to investigate the events surrounding Teresa's death, but he already knew the perpetrator.

"Martin Brenner. You'll get what's coming to you," Hopper swore as he pressed the accelerator and drove his car towards the police station. He didn't let the speedometer jump beyond thirty this time.

Karen Wheeler parked the car near the driveway and ran towards the door as fast as possible. She couldn't drive to the garage because another vehicle was blocking the path. The engine of the car was still running, and the doors were wide open. Karen also noticed some red stains on the seat of the car. *'Blood?'* She thought as she reached the door to her house in a few seconds and yanked it open. Then she saw a scene that knocked the breath straight out of her.

Teresa Ives, the woman from her past, was lying on the carpet in their drawing room. Ted was squatting beside her with a towel and a bottle of antiseptic liquid. Nancy sat towards the right and held Teresa's head on her lap and Jonathan was entering the room from the kitchen with a bowl in his hand. But none of this surprised her as much as the voice that echoed in her mind, *'Jane and Teresa Ives will always have a home here. No matter what happens, Jane will never be alone in this universe. That's a promise.'*

The voice belonged to herself. Karen lost her balance and nearly fell

to the floor as her knees gave away. But she steadied herself and somehow made it to the crowd and sat down beside Teresa. She ran her eyes on her long-lost friend and noted her features with utmost care. Teresa looked healthy, but there was a wound on her forehead. It was almost dry now but looked deep enough to have caused severe bleeding some time ago.

Karen looked at her daughter and spoke with a voice of steel, "Tell me what happened right now."

Nancy moved her gaze to the floor, "She was wounded in an accident. We found her and brought her..."

"ENOUGH," Karen screamed, "No more lies Nancy. The truth, right now. You don't know who she is to us."

Ted answered instead, "She does. I told her the story, and she promised to tell us the truth. We were waiting for you. But for now, let's take care of our friend."

Karen bit her lips and looked at her husband who appeared thoughtful. But his eyes gleamed as if he had put his foot down and had finally taken a decision. She sighed and spoke calmly, "Fine. We'll speak about this later. Just tell me one thing, Nancy."

Nancy braced for the question that she had already anticipated.

"Jane Hopper. Who is she?"

Nancy replied in an instant, "She is the one we all have been waiting for, Jane Ives, the daughter of Teresa Ives."

Karen inhaled sharply and almost broke down, "Oh God. She didn't die. Ted, she's alive!"

Ted grinned at his wife, "And Mike already found her. You still think I was crazy to keep the flower vase?"

Karen started laughing in relief, "No. You're not."

Then Karen composed herself and turned towards her daughter, "Where is she?"

"She's at the school with Mike."

"I... we need to see her."

"You can come to the birthday party," Jonathan suddenly spoke up. After all, the party was being arranged in his house, and he could invite guests. Karen eyed Ted and nodded in unison, they'd visit her tonight. Something terrible had been happening in Hawkins for a long time, and it was time to find the truth once and for all. But more importantly, it was time to tell the truth to Mike and Jane.

Karen took the bowl of warm water from Jonathan's hand and dipped some cotton into it. Then she started cleaning the wound on Teresa's forehead. She had undergone some nursing training after college and knew her way around small traumas.

Nancy was worried and spoke with a shaking voice, "We need to get her to the hospital, Mom. We don't know how deep the wound is and she's not waking up."

Karen responded without looking up, "Call the doctor who was looking after Mike in the hospital."

"Owens? But Mom..."

"Call him Nancy. He knows more than he lets on."

Nothing escaped the watchful eyes of Karen Wheeler. Jonathan went to the phone and grabbed the directory. Then he dialled Dr. Sam Owens.

"Hey, chief? Getting old?" Powell smirked as Hopper got out of his wagon and slammed the door. Powell had spent the last minute observing Hopper as he slowly drove the last stretch towards his station. Powell was clearly surprised at the speed of the car. Hopper glared at him and walked towards the door without saying a single word. He wasn't in a mood to engage in small talks. He yanked the door open and entered the precinct.

Before he could walk towards his cabin, Florence yelled from her desk, "Chief. There's some guy named Sam Owens calling you for the

past hour. He's not letting up chief. Probably called a dozen times already."

'What now?' Hopper felt as if everything was going wrong in Hawkins at the same time. He took out the small transmitter from his pocket and checked the device carefully. Owens was supposed to call him on this device, not on his office phone. But something was wrong with the blasted contraption. Hopper thumbed the switch a few times, but it didn't respond. Suddenly, the telephone in his office started ringing. Florence yelled again, "For the love of God, Jim. Give him a radio."

Hopper crashed through the door to his office to pick up the phone. About thirty seconds later, he ran out of his office faster than he had entered. Before Florence could ask him what was going on, Hopper shouted, "I'm taking the day off. If anyone asks, tell him I've left the country."

Then he stormed out of the station and ran towards his car.

Powell was driving away from the police station when the chief's car shot past his at almost twice the speed. He whistled as he noticed his own speedometer, *'Nope. He's not getting old, that's for sure.'*

An hour later, Hopper reached the Wheeler residence and recognized an odd collection of cars in front of the house. He identified Karen's car which was parked at an odd angle beside the driveway. Behind that, he saw Owen's battered wagon, and on the other side, he also identified the brand-new BMW convertible that Steve's dad had given him on his birthday. But there was an unknown Chevy Chevelle parked across the path leading to the garage and blocked the entire entrance. Hopper tried remembering the car but didn't get a single clue. He stopped his wagon behind the others and ran towards the door to the house. A minute later, he entered the house and cursed loudly, "JEESUS!"

The occupants looked at him as if they were used to people entering the house and cursing loudly. They were not surprised, but Hopper was at a complete loss for words. A random group of people was assembled in the Wheeler residence. First of all, there was the

Wheelers, except Mike who was at School. Then Jonathan and Steve were standing in one corner and whispering among themselves. Dr. Sam Owens was sitting on a chair and carefully observing a body that lied motionlessly on the couch. It was the body that shocked Hopper to the core. Teresa Ives was lying on a sofa inside Wheeler Residence as if nothing had happened. Her eyes were closed, and a bandage was wrapped around her temple. There were no scorch marks on her body as if the fire had not even touched her. *'What? How?'* Hopper thought as he tried closing his mouth.

When Hopper recovered, he noticed that everyone was looking at him as if he was the Messiah. Owens jumped up from the chair, "Did you get the medicine?"

Hopper reached inside his pocket and brought out the vial that he had picked up from his cabin on his way here. About an hour back, he had received one critical instruction over the phone, "Jim. There's no time to explain. Get the anti-hemorrhage medicine and come to the Wheelers as fast as you can."

Hopper had tried interjecting, "But..."

"NO BUTS. A life is at stake here. GET ME THE MEDICINE ASAP."

Owens took the vial and nodded in satisfaction. Then he ran to the couch and picked up a syringe that was already prepared for the task ahead. Hopper had too many questions in his mind, but he had no idea who to ask. Karen looked as if she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown while Ted was running his hands across her back and consoling her. Nancy was assisting Owens with the procedure. Hopper had never seen such a long needle in his life. He ran his eyes over Holly who giggled at him. Then his eyes fell on Steve and Jonathan who were trying to look away. He growled, "YOU TWO! COME HERE."

"But..."

"NO BUTS. IN THE KITCHEN, NOW."

It took Hopper thirty minutes to wrap his head around the events

that had led to Teresa Ives being present inside the Wheeler House, wounded and on the verge of death from intracranial hemorrhage. He banged his fist on the table and shouted, "You are an absolute idiot, Byers. I expected better from you."

Jonathan looked into the chief's eyes and spoke with calm determination, "What would you have done Chief? Would you have left Eleven and gone after Martin Brenner? Teresa would be dead if we didn't go chasing that wild goose."

"You could have been killed. He's too dangerous."

"Yes. But we didn't. That's what's more important."

Steve was not part of the discussion, but he tried to get a few words in, "Guys. I still say let's take her to a hospital."

Both Hopper and Jonathan spoke simultaneously, "Too risky."

Then Hopper growled in his throat, "I know what you two are thinking. Stay out of my way boys. I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch, and I don't want anyone of you getting involved."

"Didn't you say he was dangerous?"

Hopper looked towards the room where an old man was desperately trying to prevent death from reaching an invalid woman. He sighed, "That's why I want you to stay back. Someone needs to take care of Eleven once I'm gone."

Hopper had accepted his fate. He would take Martin Brenner out at all costs so Eleven and her friends could have a future.

"We want to help," Steve spoke with conviction.

Jonathan voiced support, "It's not like we can't take care of ourselves. We almost killed the Demogorgon last time."

After a few minutes of debating the boys, Hopper calmed himself and spoke softly, "All right, fine. You two can help. But next time, call me first. Martin is unlike anything even I have ever faced. We have to stop him together."

"That means we're in?" Steve leaned forward in excitement.

"It's not like you'll listen to reason. So, I'm considering it. But you'll not go after him directly, leave it to me. Your job is to protect the kids and Eleven for now. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." Jonathan and Steve shouted together.

Hopper groaned, "Teenagers."

Dr. Sam Owens walked into the kitchen with a broad smile, "She's safe. The medicine worked perfectly."

Hopper felt the tension leaving his body. Steve and Jonathan ran out of the kitchen as Dr. Owens came and sat beside Hopper and stared at the wall in front of them. Hopper cleared his throat, "Owens. I'm sorry for losing my shit back at the hospital."

Dr. Owens casually fanned his arms, "It's okay Jim. I should've told you the truth back then."

Hopper looked at his friend, "The truth?"

Dr. Owens gently started speaking to the air in front of him, "The medicine was not designed for Eleven. It was designed for Teresa, and it saved her from her powers today."

Hopper felt a nuclear bomb going off in his field of belief. He leaned over the counter and shouted, "WHAT?"

"The number, Eleven, is factually incorrect. She was the first child to express the gift but not the first person to do so. We have been protecting Teresa and Eleven from Martin for a very long time Jim. It didn't start a year back, it started fourteen years ago."

Hopper pressed his palm against his face, "Owens. Tell me you're joking."

"I'm sorry Hopper. All of you have gotten involved in something that has taken countless lives so far."

Hopper wanted to go fetch his daughter from school right now along

with Mike Wheeler and take them out of the country by nightfall. Maybe he could go to Mexico. Owens smiled sadly, "Won't work. You can't run away from Martin. You have to win the war."

"Owens, please. They are just kids."

Owens fished around his pocket and brought out an envelope made of plastic. He carefully opened it and took out an old paper and laid it on the table. Hopper leaned in to take a better look and felt confused at the words that were written on the paper. Owens whispered casually, "Teresa wrote these even before Eleven was born."

Hopper lost his shit, "OWENS? THE FUCK?"

"Yes, my friend. It's destiny."

Back in the Wheeler's drawing room, Nancy was confessing to her parents. This was the third time she was telling the story, but this time, she decided to tell them the absolute truth. She felt that the truth could no longer be hidden from them and most importantly, they needed to know the fate of their friend Teresa and her daughter. Ted and Karen were listening to her story with rapt attention. They were visibly shocked when Nancy started the story by explaining Eleven's powers to them. Ted held his hand up, "Wait wait. She can do what?"

"Dad, she has psychic powers."

"Like in the movies?"

"Yes. She can make things float with her mind. She can also find people by looking at their photos."

"She's a Jedi?" Ted was a big fan of Star Wars.

The reference skipped over the head of the girls as they looked at him in irritation. Ted sighed, "Go on."

Nancy started narrating the story from her memories. Part of it was from her own experiences, the other part was from the days when

Mike cried to sleep every night in her arms after Eleven had disappeared. He confessed everything to his sister back then. Now she was narrating it to her parents as best as she could. It wasn't a smooth ride because Karen and Ted lost their shit every now and then and interrupted her. Nancy was irritated but not surprised. Eleven's story was a potent mix of sci-fi, horror, tragedy, and romance, all at the same time. A lot of retrospection was needed to grasp the depth of that saga.

"YOU WENT DOWN THERE? WITH JONATHAN?" Karen looked at her daughter as if she had just confessed to murder.

Nancy sighed, "Mom, it's over."

"No, it's not. I'm gonna have a talk with Jonathan after this," Karen scowled towards the kitchen where Hopper was discussing something with the boys. Nancy prayed for Jonathan and continued. She was about to tell the part where Eleven sacrificed herself to save Mike. Nancy watched Karen as she grabbed Ted's arm and held it tightly. Her knuckles were turning white with the pressure.

"Then she disappeared into a cloud of ash. You saw what it did to Mike. Mom, it almost made him crazy as he kept searching for her."

Karen lowered her head on Ted's shoulder as tears started streaming down her eyes. She realized how close she had been to losing Jane forever and it shattered her heart. She had loved that girl even before she had been born.

Nancy almost choked up, "Mike kept calling Eleven..."

Her speech was cut short suddenly when Dr. Owens jumped up from where he was sitting and yelled, "Eureka! It's working."

Karen, Ted, and Nancy ran towards the couch. Dr. Owens smiled at them triumphantly and spoke, "The medicine's working. Just as I thought."

Karen clutched his hand, "She's gonna be alright?"

Dr. Owens nodded, "She'll be good as new in a few hours. She just needs some rest and food."

Karen smiled, "I know just what she likes. I'll make her some soup."

Then Dr. Owens left for the kitchen, and they sat in front of the couch. Karen held Teresa's hand and urged Nancy to continue. She needed closure to decide what to do with her son and Jane.

"Mike kept calling out to Eleven for 353 days. Every day."

Ted nodded, "He's dedicated. I'd give him that."

"But she couldn't respond, Hopper was hiding her in his cabin."

Karen cursed angrily, "Hopper's an asshole. He had any idea what it did to Mike?"

"Mom, the agents were still looking for her."

"Damn them to hell. How dare they lock up Jane? She is a part of this family."

Ted spoke calmly, "I'll get in touch with a friend in the Pentagon. He might be knowing something. We need to get the agents off her back once and for all."

A few minutes down the line, Steve and Jonathan came out of the kitchen and sat beside them. Nancy moved onto the fateful night when Eleven closed the gate.

"Hopper walked in a few hours later, carrying her body in his arms. She was dead."

"WHAT? BUT SHE'S ALIVE."

"Mike brought her back, mom. Don't ask how, we still don't know the true extent of her power," Nancy paused.

Steve took over, "A part of her power is tied to Mike. Dustin told me the story later. Mike reached inside Eleven's soul and brought her back from death."

"Oh, so he's a Jedi too?" Ted was excited.

"NOOO," everyone screamed with frustration. Ted had thrown in over a dozen Jedi references so far and didn't show any sign of letting up.

"She came back from death because of a promise." Nancy knew the truth. Mike had not stopped confessing to her even after Eleven had come back to him and ended his nightmare.

Karen leaned in and spoke, "What promise?"

Nancy smiled at the people looking at her, "Mike had promised Eleven that he would give her a life that she deserves. And she had promised to live it with him."

"Awww, he likes her," Karen grinned at Ted.

He furrowed his eyebrows, "They are fourteen, Karen."

"And at what age did you write your first love letter, Ted?"

"Would you look at the time. Hurry up, Nancy."

They all laughed, and Nancy continued to the Snowball. It was a heartwarming story, and Karen started laughing, "He spent a week selecting that outfit."

"Not funny mom. He nearly lost his cool and left the stadium." Nancy puffed her lips in mock frustration. Then she picked up the water bottle to take a sip. The next part was the hardest to narrate.

"Mom, dad. Mike didn't get into an accident on the night of the Snowball."

Nancy let the dialogue sink in and continued in a rapid pace, "He was shot by an assassin sent by Martin Brenner. The same man who had stolen Eleven. The same man who had fried her brains."

Nancy indicated Teresa. This piece of information was so shocking that Karen and Ted forgot to react. Then Nancy delivered the final bombshell, "The same man who tried to kill Teresa last night."

She waited for his parents to make a comment. It came after three minutes. Ted spoke up with a shaking voice, "What is this Martin

Brenner?"

He could finally see a monster instead of a man. In fact, he was close to finding the true nature of the beast. Karen kept her mouth closed because she couldn't find the words to speak.

"He is the man who is hell bent on destroying this world. And he wants to use Eleven to do it," Dr. Owens came out of the kitchen along with Hopper. Hopper looked like he was staring at some ghosts. His eyes kept fluttering between Teresa and the occupants of the room.

Ted squawked, "But why Mike?"

Dr. Owens hardened his jaw and spoke with resolution, "Whatever his plan is, only one person in this world can stop him, Ted. And that's your boy, Mike Wheeler. He can take away his weapon, as he was destined to do so."

Karen suddenly shrieked, "This is crazy. There's a madman running out there, and all of you are speaking as if its a story from the fables. Weapon? She's a child for God's sake."

"Not to Martin. To him, she's an expendable weapon, ready to be used and discarded as he pleases. He won't stop until he kills her."

"Then call the police, call the military, call the press, call the goddamned government."

"They'll take away Jane. Are you okay with that?" Dr. Owens directly challenged Karen.

She didn't even take a second to answer the question, "No. I won't let anyone take Teresa and Jane away from me ever again."

Ted nodded and voiced support, "We made a promise, Dr. Owens. We Wheelers tend to keep our promises at whatever the cost."

Ted got up and moved to Hopper, "Jim. I'll do whatever I can. I don't know how to shoot a gun, but I have significant financial resources. And I know a few people in the Pentagon."

Hopper automatically shook his head, he was still dazed from whatever discussion he'd had with Dr. Owens in the kitchen. Steve and Jonathan walked to Nancy and started whispering something to her. Karen pressed Teresa's hand against her lips and closed her eyes. Even Holly was looking determined as she carried an old book in her arms that portrayed a Knight on the cover.

Dr. Owens smiled satisfactorily, it was happening again. The inescapable gravity of Eleven was drawing people towards her. The alleged power was so potent that at one time, Martin had to devise special plans to restrain it. But now that she was free at last, this side of her power was rising again. The real power of Eleven was not her ability to move things around with her mind.

The true potential of Eleven was the bonds she forged with people who loved her and like the gravity of a collapsing neutron star, they were almost impossible to escape from. Martin had given a name to that power, *'The Bonds of Destiny' - the true power of the girl who could mould the lives of those she cared about.* And now that the Wheelers had become a part of the star system, Teresa's prophecy was finally fulfilled after fourteen agonizing years.

The world did not believe in miracles, but Dr. Owens did. And now, the people in this room joined him as well. He carefully made his way to Teresa and checked her pulse. It was beating at a steady pace, and she would be awake soon. The rest was up to Karen now. She was, after all, the Goddess of this house and Dr. Owens knew better than to mess around with mothers. Martin nearly lost his life to one. He smiled at the occupants as he walked towards the door, "See you all at the party."

Hopper glowered at him, "Who invited you?"

"Teresa did." Dr. Owens tapped his palm on the pocket where he kept the only remaining copy of Teresa's prophecy that started everything. He had decided to tell the story of Eleven to all the invitees of the party tonight. Every one of them had already become a part of Eleven's constellation even before she was born. Now they would fight this war by her side.

"It's time to end this, old friend. Once and for all." Dr. Owens murmured as he left the room to prepare for the grand revelation of Teresa's message to the heavens.

The Episode continues after the break with 'Apollo: The God of Light.'

A/N:

A. The part about Scott Clarke's brother is expanded in my new project: 'Eleven: The Beginning (Chapter 1 published now).' Next chapters in both Pantheon and in that project will showcase the true impact of that man in Eleven's life when she was imprisoned in HNL.

B. One of Eleven's most potent gift is named Bonds of Destiny; if you're a new reader, I'll suggest that you read 'Armageddon - Episode II: Gravity (Part of this work).' Going forward this ability will play a vital role in the upcoming final battle.

C. The anti-hemorrhage medicine is a relic of the past, referred first in 'Arc IV: Unsheathed.' Then occasionally mentioned in other places. The exact nature of that discovery is finally revealed here.

D. Ted's not speaking in thin air, he really has contacts in places.

This chapter serves a starting point of my connected universe. So far, my stories had remained mostly independent and tackled one concept at a time. I had given references wherever required, but now everything is coalescing together as we move forward to the next episode of Armageddon.

Please let me know how you are liking the story so far.

12. E3: Pantheon - Act V

Armageddon: Episode III - Pantheon

Act V: Apollo

Apollo, is the Olympian God of the sun and light. He is harmony, reason and moderation personified, a perfect blend of physical superiority and moral virtue.

His power shatters lies and reveals the truth hidden in the deepest corner of the human soul.

Scott Clarke was a man who believed in the rational side of nature. He didn't believe in magic, or ghosts, or telepathy. So, one day when he received a strange letter from his long-estranged brother, he thought that his brother was merely messing with his mind. Now, over one year later, he held that letter in his shaking hands as his beliefs forever shattered into pieces.

Earlier that day, Jim Hopper had brought his young niece to school for the first time, she would be studying here for the next couple of years. At that very moment, dozens of alarm clocks had gone off in Scott's subconscious and had not stopped ringing even for a moment. Their cacophony had finally broken through the web of lies when he reached the radio room and retrieved this cursed piece of paper.

The first alarm had fired on the same day Jim had called to give the heads up. If it was anyone else, Scott wouldn't have cared. But he was almost sure that Jim had no relatives with a kid that age. To top it off, Jim said that the girl was just about to arrive in Hawkins in a few days. Then who was the kid for whom Jim kept buying the Eggos, candies, and comics for? Scott had excellent observation skills but chose not to delve in gossips or slander. Then came the fact that the young girl looked familiar to him. He couldn't place a name to that elongated face with those pointy ears, but he was sure that he had seen her earlier. His subconscious delivered the answer a few hours ago when Scott accidentally called out Eleanor instead of Jane while taking attendance. Jane Hopper was Eleanor, Mike's estranged cousin from Sweden, which would have been an impossible idea save for another fact that connected all the strings together. Jane Hopper was

bleeding from her nose this morning when Scott met her for the first time. Eleanor had suffered a nosebleed last year at the stadium where Troy pissed his pants. And according to this letter, the telepathic girl named Eleven would also bleed from her nose under unusual circumstances.

Scott loved facts, they shed light on the mystery enveloping the cosmos and enabled men of science to have a better perception of their surroundings. But for once in his life, Scott hated the facts and the secrets that were unearthed by them. Puzzles were not new in Hawkins. Last year, Will Byers had gone missing in the woods for over a week until he was rescued by Jim Hopper. That was a conundrum because right at the time when he was saved, the school was shut down by the military for weeks without any prior notification, and then Hopper was all over the case like a relentless hound. What was so crucial that Hopper abandoned the case of Will Byers and dived straight into the Russian Spy incident involving the school? As far as Scott's knowledge went, Hopper preferred keeping his distance from the feds. The events might not be connected, but Scott didn't like coincidences. Then something peculiar occurred a few months ago when all the lights in his sleeping room burned like the sun for a few minutes, twice. The second time it nearly blinded him as he struggled to leave the room in search of safety. Scott hated these specific mysteries because he couldn't connect them. But maybe now he could.

And then there was this new enigma. Scott turned his head towards his right and observed the brand new radio that was carefully assembled on top of a sturdy table. The old set had been ruined by some unknown calamity on the same day when Eleanor had visited the school. He had tried raising funds to buy a new one but returned empty-handed every time. But then he got the shock of his life when he discovered a huge box outside his office a few days ago. It had contained this marvelous contraption, the best radio set in the market right now. There was a small note attached to the box that read, *'The mantle is being passed on to you. Protect it until your last breath.'*

Scott was utterly confused about the note, and the device accompanying it. He evaluated the paper and came to a conclusion that it was printed by a law firm, there was a logo embossed on the

paper. He searched the directory and called their head office in Atlanta, but the firm refused to divulge any information about their clients. He did notice the type of the business the firm conducted, it centered around managing properties and executing wills and testaments. Was this device a part of someone's final Will and Testament? That made no sense to Scott, he knew no one who could allocate such a massive amount of funds to a small town school teacher and his unusual hobbies.

But none of this came even close to the mystery of this girl named Eleven. According to his brother, James, the young child could... Scott felt a drop of water in his head. He instinctively put his hand on his head to wipe the droplet off. Then it hit him. He was sitting in his office, and there were no water lines above his head. He lowered his hand in front of his face and lost his composure completely. His palm was coated in blood. Scott gulped and slowly raised his head above to look at the ceiling. He saw a beautiful face with a bloodied nose and eyes full of fear and guilt, then the world crashed around him, and he lost his consciousness.

Just a few minutes before Mr. Clarke was slapped with the most shocking truth of his life, a group of children was on the verge of losing their collective shit inside the same radio room. Eleven had successfully evaded their capture by floating them to the ceiling before he had walked into the room. But Mr. Clarke showed no sign of leaving in any time soon. He was comfortably sitting on his desk staring at a strange piece of paper that he had pulled out of the drawer some time ago. Mike breathed to calm himself down and turned his head to look the girl who was trying her best to keep them pinned to the ceiling. Eleven was looking down at Mr. Clarke, and her chest moved slightly, an indication that she was trying her best to focus her powers on the six of them. Mike observed the lights in the room with a tinge of uncertainty, but they didn't flicker at all, an indication of Eleven's maturity with her powers. The lights were slightly brighter than usual, but Mr. Clarke was so absorbed in that yellow piece of paper that he didn't notice the strange deviation at all.

If Eleven could somehow persist a few minutes longer, they might escape their fate after all. Mike was about to smile at his fortune, but

his lips stopped moving as his eyes fell on Eleven's face. A drop of blood had come out from her nose and was about to fall straight down on the shiny head below them. '*Shit*,' Mike extended his arm to catch the droplet. He couldn't make any sound lest he ended up giving their position away. His arms almost reached her nose, but then the droplet flew free and made a dash towards the floor. '*Gravity is such a bitch*,' Mike made a note in his head as the drop fell on Mr. Clarke's head. He looked up a moment later as Eleven shot straight towards him with a violent push and knocked him out cold. Then she brought the other kids down to the ground.

They were speechless. Lucas gained his composure a second later and spoke with a shaky voice, "Did... did you... umm..."

Eleven put him at ease by speaking earnestly, "I didn't hurt him. He passed out from the shock of seeing me."

"But you're not scary!" Max sounded uncertain.

Mike swallowed as an image from the night of Snowball flashed in his mind. Dustin was looking at Mr. Clarke's face with a strange curiosity. A few minutes passed in awkward silence, no one knew what to do.

Suddenly Will shouted and jumped back a few feet from where he was standing. The others immediately turned to his direction and found him staring at the old paper that Mr. Clarke was reading earlier. During the commotion, it had flown away from the table and landed near the wall from where Will had picked it up a few minutes earlier. Now he was looking at it as if it was a death warrant. His eyes were jumping all over the paper and kept trying their best to move away. But that old article held them like super glue.

Mike ran to Will, held his shoulders and shook him, "Will? WILL?"

Will looked at Mike and then moved his gaze at Eleven who immediately looked away. She knew what that letter contained. Will groaned, "You know what this is?"

"Yes." Eleven replied in a sad voice as drops of tear started rolling down her cheek. Everyone was shocked, Max ran to her, "Eleven?"

She spoke in a broken voice, "That letter is from James, his brother. " Eleven pointed to the unconscious form of Mr. Clarke and spoke earnestly, "James was my only friend from the lab. He died on the night I escaped."

Hawkins would soon need more dentists if jaws kept dislocating at such a high rate. The kids were dumbfounded. Eleven had a friend in the lab? That man had written a letter to Mr. Clarke? He was his brother? And he was dead?

Mike cleared his throat, "Umm, guys. Shouldn't we leave before he wakes up?"

Before anyone could speak, Eleven spoke with resolve, "NO. We are not leaving. I have to tell him about James."

The old Eleven, who had slammed the door on the very first day Lucas was about to rat her out, was back and she would not budge an inch even for Mike. She decided to tell the truth to the man who was supposed to save her on that fateful night, and the gang had to concede to her demands. In fact, they were happy at the outcome, because they liked Mr. Clarke a lot. He had selflessly helped them in the past, and for that, he deserved to know the truth. But in all probability, they also needed to hear the truth from him. It was an equivalent exchange.

They propped Mr. Clarke carefully on the ground so he wouldn't fall over. Then they sat on the floor and started discussing the letter. Dustin wanted to read it, and so did Lucas. But Mike and Max were against reading a message addressed to someone else. Will coughed and pointed to Eleven, "We can read it if she gives us permission. It's addressed to her as well."

Eleven slowly nodded as Will sighed and started reading the letter with a heavy heart;

'Dear Eleven,

If you're reading this letter, then don't. It's not for you. Remember our talk about privacy?'

"Whoa, whoa!" Mike raised his arm, "She's not supposed to read it." Dustin made a funny noise through his teeth, "I only heard Dear Eleven."

"But..."

"Read it!" Eleven spoke in a cold voice that sent shivers down everyone's spine.

Will continued;

'Dear Brother,

If you're reading this letter, that means I am no longer on this earth. Don't feel sad, I have fulfilled my duty. I have preserved the most sacred blossom in this world. And now I pass the mantle onto you. You must follow my instructions carefully, the fate of the world depends on it. And so does the future of a child.

What I am about to write may sound like the dialogues of a complete madman, but I swear on our mother's grave, that every bit of it is the absolute truth. I request you to throw away all your prejudices and read this letter with an open mind.

Science has failed us.

It started over thirteen years ago. You knew that I was working for the government back then. What you didn't know was the nature of our research. The world was so paranoid back then that we kept receiving hundreds of reports about strange experiments being run across the continents. The Soviets made the most noise, and we would often shred their statements without reading because they were straight out of Sci-fi Novels. But those reports gave us an opportunity to conduct trials of our own. I always thought them to be a bunch of lies, designed to siphon money off the government's paranoia.

Then one day, I met a psychiatrist named Dr. Sam Owens, and my world changed forever. In some ways, you could say that he opened my eyes. Truth be told, I wish he didn't, because I wasn't ready to witness the horror the world brought forward. He invited me to join a project called MK Ultra, being run by the CIA right here in the States. They were trying to push the human mind beyond its limits and dear brother, they had succeeded.

It all started with simple activities, like bending spoons, or reading words from the reverse side of the paper. Then they discovered Teresa Ives. I still don't know how they found her, but she showed a fantastic ability. She could see into the future. I know that you are probably laughing now, I was too, until Sam invited me during one of the experiments. I witnessed sorcery for the first time in my life, and right then I knew that we were

doomed. Under special circumstances, Teresa predicted the exact winning combination of a lottery five times in a row. But that wasn't the true extent of her power, her real gift to this world was the curse she gave birth to before losing her sanity forever.

I moved to Sweden for a couple of years to do some research. Sam was taking care of Teresa while I was gone. Then I returned and found the world at the brink of chaos. The ruin was started by the most intriguing man I have ever seen. Dr. Martin Brenner, the lead scientist of MK Ultra, is a monster in human disguise. He continuously tries pushing the limits of his subjects and has no sympathy for their well being. From the very start, he was not aiming for Teresa. He had his eyes set on her unborn child, a girl named Jane Ives, who was endowed with heavenly powers. I could probably write a novel about her, but in simple terms, she is the pinnacle of human existence. Some would say that she is not even human. I agree.

She is something beyond humanity. I coined a term for her, 'Homo Superior,' the next step in human evolution.

While Teresa could make small things float with her mind and look into the near future, her daughter, Jane can rip open an armored tank with her psionic abilities and find people across the oceans by only looking at their picture, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. During one of the experiments, I witnessed her bringing down an entire covert military unit within five minutes. She ripped them to shreds in the blink of an eye. It was a horrible sight indeed, but it was not her fault.

While I was in Sweden, Martin had forged Jane into an unstoppable weapon without a soul in the guise of countering the Soviet Experiments. The military provided their full support to him and why wouldn't they? Think about the possibilities, a covert superhuman assassin resembling a sweet and innocent child. She could get through security by the sheer virtue of her small stature and delightful behavior. Once she penetrated the shield, she could just blow the brains of her target...'

"Enough!" Mike shouted.

Will stopped reading and gritted his teeth in frustration. Eleven was standing in front of them like a statue. Her past and future were being uncovered right in front of her friends' eyes, and she was too shocked to react. Mike felt as if her clothes were being ripped away

one piece at a time while she was powerless to stop them. He moved to her and gently clasped her shoulders.

"It's okay. It's the past, we don't need to read it."

"No." Eleven spoke calmly, "Read it. You need to know who I am."

"Eleven..." Mike whispered.

She didn't let him finish, "No Mike. You need to know this if you want to save me."

Mike sighed and snatched the paper from Will's hands. Will breathed a sigh of relief, the words were becoming too heavy for him.

Mike continued;

'... and run away before they caught her. She doesn't need a line of sight or any weapons.

But Scott, you know what her most significant power is? It's not her ability to murder people with her mind. Her greatest potential is to expose the truth to those around her. In reality, it was us who had lost our humanity. She wasn't a superior human, she was the only one left in that facility. We stole the mind of an innocent child and turned her into a freak, and sunk beneath humanity in the process.

I still remember the first time I met her, right after one of the trials. They had locked her inside a room made with iron as thick as timbers. They were trying to control the beast. They allowed me to enter the room a few hours later, and when I saw her, my heart stopped. She was cowering at one corner, eyes swollen as if she had continuously cried since the experiment and finally ran out of tears. Her face and clothes were smeared with the blood of her enemies, and probably her own. She was snarling at me like a rabid animal. Her teeth were bared, and she hissed at me if I were her prey. She looked like a freak straight from the asylum. My mind told me to run away as fast as I could. She was going to kill me.

You know what I did? I sat in that room for 6 hours until she fell asleep. Then I gently carried her back into her new room that I set up. After that, I stayed beside her until this very moment. Jane had tried to kill me multiple times in the past, she probably broke my bones at least a dozen times, she almost took out an eye, and at one beautiful evening, she stopped my heart out of sheer frustration.

But I never left her side. Through all the pain and suffering, I guarded her against her fate as long as she was inside the facility. You know why I did that? Because of her eyes Scott. Through all that rage and the flames of hatred, her soul screamed at the endless nightmares that reflected in her dark eyes. They begged me to save her and rescue her from her horrors. I realized that underneath the thorns that threatened to destroy this world, lay a beautiful flower. I saw the child hiding under that shadow as she slept peacefully in her room, crouched into a small fluffy ball.

I swore an oath that day Scott. I promised to save her at all costs. You know that I was always good with children, you have no idea. While Martin kept destroying her soul, I continued forging it back together with love and affection. It was a perpetual battle, and in which I almost won at the end. But then Martin dealt his trump card and unleashed hell on this planet.

He forced Eleven to pierce through the space-time barrier and open a gateway to some godforsaken dimension from which a terrible monster appeared. We are still not sure if that was Martin's intention to begin with, but he was also surprised by that strange aberration. It slaughtered half of the personnel in the lab in less than an hour, but then it faced judgment. Jane was not supposed to be there when it found us, but she came running to save me and pushed the abomination back into the portal. And then she lost her soul and went berserk. I located her at the nick of time and brought her back somehow. And then I freed her from this facility and instructed her to run to you.

She won't respond to her name; Jane. The last battle with the monsters had stolen her soul and most of her memories. But she remembers the number that was etched on her wrist the day she was doomed. Her identity is reduced to those three digits now; 011.

You'll know when you see her. Her name is Eleven, and you must protect her at all costs. Look out for the nosebleed. It's the mark of her curse. When she engages her powers, she bleeds from her nostril, especially the left one. Scott, don't be alarmed, she is not a monster, she is just a child. I love her as...

Mike swallowed and stopped. He stole a glance at Eleven, her eyes were closed, and tears kept flowing from the corners. He wasn't sure

about the next part. Lucas snatched the paper from him and spoke angrily, "For crying out loud."

Then he continued;
'...my own daughter.'

Lucas's voice started shaking, the tragedy was finally unearthing itself. But he pressed on;

'And it's time to say goodbye brother. I won't escape the facility, the abomination has returned. I'll place the letter in a secure place and someone will deliver it to you within a few days. I pray by the time you read this you would have already found Eleven and sheltered her from her past. Hide her as best as you can and wait for the signal. In time, someone will contact you, the last of us.'

Remember when we used to roleplay The Lords of the Rings when we were kids? Remember how I always used to be the Knight and you only wanted to be the Wizard? Well, the era of Knights has come to an end, brother. Science won't win this battle, but Magic will. The magic of love, compassion, and empathy. That's all it will take to save my daughter from her fate.'

Martin will come for her, but fear not, help is on the way. Teresa had foretold their arrival before she lost her mind, and not a single one of her prophecies had failed to come true.'

And on a separate note, are you keeping your eyes on that kid as I asked you to? I didn't tell the truth back then, but now I have nothing to fear. He's the key, Scott. Teresa carved his name in the stars above, he's the sheath to Martin's sword. We don't know what role he would play, but...'

Lucas stopped with a hiccup. The others eyed him warily. What was so damn complicated that even he couldn't pronounce them? Lucas kept his gaze locked at the ground in front of him. Dustin muttered angrily, "You want something to be done, you gotta do it yourself. Here, give me that."

Dustin snatched the paper from Lucas's shaking hands and held it against the light. Then he cursed like a drunken sailor, "SON OF A BITCH!"

The others sighed as Dustin and Lucas kept looking at each other with slacked jaws. Mike felt irritated and spoke angrily, "Fine. I'll do it."

"NOO," Dustin shouted as Mike snatched the paper from his hand. They were playing a strange game of drawing straws, and no one wanted the short straw. Fine, he would do it. He was sure that nothing in that letter could surprise... Mike lowered his gaze on the paper and felt his blood freezing inside the veins. The next set of words pointed towards an impossibility, and it was beyond something even he was willing to put up with. But he summoned enough courage and read it with a hoarse voice;

'...Mike Wheeler must be protected at all costs until he meets Jane 'Eleven' Ives.'

Mike couldn't think straight. He had seen many impossibilities turning into possibilities in the last year. But this hit him straight into the guts, and by the looks of things the others were in worse shape. The last part of the letter made no sense at all. It was all going fine about Eleven and her powers and her guardian but from where did Mike came into it all of a sudden? He had never seen this man named James Clarke. He grimaced and read the last part of the letter;

'Good luck and Godspeed Scott. And remember;

And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio...'

A voice boomed behind them, "Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The Episode continues after the break with 'Hercules: The Hero of Ages'

A/N: This Chapter ties in with Eleven - The Beginning, my prequel series of ST. The story of Eleven's guardians will continue there.

Additional Notes:

Dear Readers. Armageddon will be on hiatus for the next two weeks due

to time constraints. But I will be floating a unique ST project in a day or two; one which will be exciting for both you as a reader and me as a writer.

Armageddon will resume on first week of November and continue its weekly schedule.

13. E3: Pantheon - Act VI

Armageddon: Episode III - Pantheon

Act VI: Hercules

The bridge between Heaven and Earth, Hercules, was a hero who challenged and defeated the greatest foe mankind had ever faced;

Impossibility

'Magic isn't real.'

'It is.'

'Then prove it.'

'I'm not a magician... yet.'

'You're just a...'

Scott Clarke grimaced as he remembered the fights he used to have with his brother about magic when they were kids. Eventually, Scott's brother won the argument when both of them ventured in the field of Science. But today it was finally confirmed that magic was real, although his brother had to pay a terrible price for surrendering to fate.

More than a decade ago, Scott's brother James had given him the responsibility to rescue his adopted daughter, Jane Eleven Ives, from her fate after James himself had succumbed to his own. Though Scott had managed to squander the opportunity back then, he was determined to redeem himself this time. The first step of his atonement would be trying to understand what exactly they were dealing with. Though the saga of Eleven was a fascinating one, especially the way Mike and his friends described the upside down, but behind Mr. Clarke's smiling face, an analytical brain was working non-stop to connect the dots together.

First of all, all the conjectures formed by the scientific community and science fiction writers were correct, a higher dimension did exist in parallel to their own. Second, Eleven could break through the barrier with her psychic powers. Scott had a rudimentary knowledge of Human Anatomy, but he was confident that even Nobel laureate scientists would be out of their depths if tasked with explaining how

she achieved that feat. At first Scott's rational mind had decided to tie a blindfold and ignore Eleven's abilities as distractions, but then she had used her powers to float him to the ceiling. Since then, he had decided to analyze everything the kids told him no matter how ungodly they appeared, but instead of trying to find scientific theories in the story, he would try to find the answer to the all-encompassing question; *'How to save Eleven from her Powers?'*

At the exact moment, some distance from the school, Karen Wheeler was stuck between a rock and a hard place, figuratively. She was staring at a long lost promise that had returned to remind her about the unstoppable sword of fate. A few moments later, a firm hand dropped on her shoulder. Karen gripped the hand and spoke softly, "What should we do, Ted?"

"Get ready for a birthday party?" There was a tinge of amusement in Ted's voice.

Karen shook her head and answered, "Can't leave her Ted. She can wake up at any moment, and we need to be there for her."

"Who said anything about leaving Teresa?" Ted gasped.

"Ted?"

"Get dressed and help me wrap the present for Jane. I'm sure Teresa will wake up in time to attend her daughter's birthday party."

"How do you know?"

"I don't, I believe," Ted squeezed his wife's hand and spoke with a determined voice.

In response, Karen stood up and started walking towards her room. Before entering through the door, she asked, "What are we gifting her Ted?"

"We are gifting Jane her destiny."

Karen closed the door behind her without further reply.

Ted sat down beside Teresa and kept a watchful eye on her. A few minutes later, Holly walked up to her dad with an old comic book in her hands. On any other day, Ted would have called Karen to take care of their daughter. But today he picked her up and sat her down on his laps. Then he gently kissed her on her cheeks. The eye of a tremendous storm was about to drift away from the town of Hawkins, and from the lives of the Wheelers once and for all. The edge of the tornado had passed over their lives more than a decade ago when

Terry christened Mike and subsequently yielded to her fate. Then Mike was born, and the eye of the storm reached the Wheelers and gave them some momentary respite. Now Teresa was back in their lives, heralding the end to an era of peace and tranquility. The other edge of the storm had finally arrived with a vengeance. Ted could feel the impending doom looming over the horizon. He wasn't sure how long he would get the chance to hold his daughter again, so he decided to take the opportunity to let her know how much he loved her, and all of them.

Holly pointed the finger at the unconscious form on the couch and spoke, "Who is she?"

"She's your mother's best friend."

"Best... friend?"

Ted thought about Holly's age and decided to explain it more straightforwardly. He whispered to his daughter, "What do you like best in this world?"

"Cookies, mint chocolate," Holly replied instantly.

"No Holly. That is what you want right now. Not always. Because you said it without thinking. Now think."

Holly concentrated for a minute, then her eyes lit up. She swung her hand which was grasping the old comic book and spoke excitedly, "This book."

Ted was mildly amused. He never figured that Holly would turn out to be a fan of comics like Mike was. During one of Ted's faraway business trips, he had picked the book up from a street vendor after taking a fleeting look at the title. He figured that Mike would love it, after all, which boy wouldn't like the tales of knights and demons. But he never thought that young girls could also become ardent followers of ancient stories based on oaths and chivalry. Ted decided to skip the bigger picture for now and muttered, "Then when you have a best friend, you would give the book to him, or to her and you won't ask for it unless the person gives it back to you. Best friends share everything between themselves, no matter how precious they are."

Holly nodded eagerly and climbed down from her father's lap. Then she cocked her head and asked, "Can she be my best friend?"

Ted smiled as he recollected a scene from the bygone era. He remembered a room in which a young girl, his daughter Nancy, kept playing with a vibrant young woman who showed an uncanny ability

to befriend children. It was unfortunate that Holly would not get the chance to see that woman in her prime. Ted was hopeful, but he wasn't delusional. He spoke nonetheless, "Then maybe you can go to her and give her that book?"

Holly took a few small steps and reached the couch, then she laid the book gently on Teresa's chest and a second later, started tittering. Behind her, Ted jumped up from the chair and started shouting, "Karen? KAREN? COME OUT RIGHT NOW."

"Martin Brenner won't stop until HE GETS ELEVEN," Mike raised his voice as he concluded the story. Scott had already sat down and was lost in thoughts. He understood why Martin might want his subject back, but he had no clue why he would want to murder Mike in the first place. And there was this conundrum about how Martin tried forging Eleven into a supernatural assassin. But how did that man ensure that Eleven wouldn't turn on her masters? Then Scott remembered something, '*...research into the duality of human mind...*'

He jumped up from the chair and startled the kids. Then he spoke with a concerned voice, "What was the thing you told me about the Matrix?"

Mike narrated his visions about the object called Control Matrix one more time, and Scott vaguely remembered a research paper he had read almost seven years ago.

He spoke with a stern voice, "Kids. You need to go home right now."

"What?" Dustin was surprised.

"I need to check on something. If I think this Control Matrix is what it sounds like, then we need to secure Jane right now."

Mike strained his voice as he screamed the words, "WHAT IS IT? CAN IT HARM HER? WHY WON'T YOU TELL US?"

"If it's what I think it is then our chances of protecting Jane just became marginally higher than Dustin's chance of entering the library again. Let me check up some old research work, then I'll visit you guys tonight," the finality was evident in Mr. Clarke's voice.

He turned around, picked up the phone and dialed a number that he should have called in the morning. After a complete set of rings went unanswered, he slammed the phone and breathed through his teeth.

"Can't find that man when you need him the most," he soliloquized

and sighed.

Dustin spoke up, "Who are you looking for?"

"Hopper. I want to talk to Hopper. You kids know where he's right now?"

Will replied, "No. But he'll come to our house this evening. You can catch him there."

A few hours later, at the edge of the town, in a small house, Joyce Byers carefully laid the last layer of icing on a beautiful but strange cake adorned with elegant patterns. She hummed a tune as she carefully appraised the design and smiled satisfactorily at her handiwork. Then she stood up and made her way to the living room. As soon as she stepped in front of the table, the doorbell rang loudly. Joyce made her way to the door and opened it an inch and peeked through the slit. Then she furrowed her eyebrows as she closed the door, opened the chain latch and held the door wide open. A second later, Jonathan and Nancy walked through the door with a gaunt look on their faces.

Joyce noticed their appearance and spoke with alarm, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing mom, nothing," Jonathan gave a fake smile.

"But..."

Nancy interjected, "We're just tired from the trip, that's all."

Joyce watched her son and his girlfriend making their way towards their room. She picked up a faint smell of smoke when they walked past her but decided to leave them for now. Today was her daughter's birthday, and she needed to make sure everything was perfect. She would deal with Jonathan later.

Then one by one the guests started coming in. Steve was next, he walked in with a somewhat bewildered look on his face. A few minutes later, Mr. Murray Bauman, the reporter, stepped in with an expression which was halfway between drowsy and furious. Joyce had no intention of allowing that man inside, but Jonathan and Nancy both vouched for him. Then came Mr. Clarke with an excited but somewhat puzzled smile on his face. He gave some excuse about doing research and asked about Hopper. Joyce couldn't remember inviting him to the party, but she admired the man enough to let him in with a polite smile.

'What's with the odd stares? Have they all gone crazy or is it just me?'

Joyce was wondering when the doorbell rang again. She walked to the door and held it open as Hopper walked in with a tired gait. Joyce closed the door behind him, and as soon as he reached the center of the room, she grabbed his hand tightly.

Then she hissed through her teeth, "My son and his girlfriend, then Steve, then that mangy reporter and now you, all walk into my house on the eve of Eleven's birthday with strange looks on your faces. I want to know what's going on."

Hopper shrugged and replied quietly, "It's nothing. They must be tired."

"All of them? Steve too? What was he doing that made him tired?"

"Listen, Joyce, I'm sorry. It's just that we have been under constant stress from all the events happening in Hawkins recently. Just a few hours ago I received a report that a farm was attacked by some unknown animal last night that managed to slaughter an entire herd of cows. And no one heard a thing."

"What? That thing we saw last night?" The strain was evident in Joyce's shaking voice.

"Not sure. Something is happening Joyce. This might be the last night we get to enjoy before hell breaks loose again. Let's celebrate as best as we can. I promise you that I'll tell you everything after the party tonight." Hopper pleaded. Joyce decided to let go and put her faith on Hopper for now and went back to answer the door.

A mile from Joyce's house, four cycles raced through the sleeping suburbs at phenomenal speed. Though if an observer was to notice, he would be shocked not at the speed but rather at the fact that no one was paddling the contraptions. Mike and his band were riding the cycles though Eleven was driving them with her powers. Max had ditched her broken skateboard in school and was now comfortably sitting behind Lucas with her arms secured around his waist. Beside her, on a cycle cruising smoothly like the rest, Eleven was similarly sitting behind Mike, but she was clutching on to Mike rather loosely. Today was a mixed day, as Hopper would like to call it. In one hand, Eleven was happy that James' brother, Mr. Clarke now knew the truth and didn't blame her for his brother's death.

On the other hand, she was apprehensive about Mike and his friends

getting to know about her past, a story that took away Hopper's sleep for three days. Eleven was worried that Mike might be afraid of her powers now. She had seen a TV show where a man had spoken to a woman, *'Fear destroys the foundation of love, Cathy. I'm sorry, but I need to go away.'*

Suddenly Mike pressed the brake of the bike, and it stopped on its tracks as Eleven was lurched forward on to Mike's back. The other bikes stopped a few meters away, and they all looked back at the distressed duo with a barrage of questions in their eyes.

Mike looked back at Eleven and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I... nothing. It's nothing."

"I remember how you used to hold me when we were riding the bike. Now you're staying back. Something's wrong."

Eleven didn't know what to say. Actually, she wasn't sure about what to say. But Mike relieved her from her predicament with a simple statement, "Stop being so afraid. We know more about your past, but it doesn't change who you are or how we feel about you, Eleven."

Then without waiting for a reply, Mike started paddling again and joined his friends.

'They are not afraid. It's me who's afraid. But I don't need to be afraid of Mike. He took me to the Snowball,' Eleven flashed a wide grin and clutched onto Mike as she used to and laid her head on his shoulder. Then she used her powers to boost the bikes again. Max noticed the smile on Mike's face and winked at Eleven who returned a puzzled but relieved glance. But none of them saw the frown on Will's face who was riding behind the group. Over the last few days, he had noticed that Mike could somehow sense Eleven's emotions, and often without even looking at her face. Something unfamiliar was happening between the two, and Will wasn't sure if it was for the best.

The cycles neared a curb, and Eleven reduced the speed slowly until the bikes banked through the corner, startling a stray cat that was about to cross the road. About a minute later the band reached the Byers residence, and Eleven released her power as the bikes slowly stopped at the entrance.

"We're here. Anyone knows why Mrs. Byers called us?" Mike winked at his friends while Eleven was looking away.

All of them knew but chose to hide their answer in the veil of

obfuscation. Mike moved to the door and knocked twice. It opened a few seconds later, and they walked into the house slowly. The window drapes were drawn, masking the twilight that was desperately trying to fight the darkness inside the room. Dustin closed the door behind him, and the room was plunged into darkness.

A moment later, the light suddenly came on and blinded them as a multitude of voices rang in the air, "Happy Birthday Eleven!" Eleven was visibly taken aback. First of all, she thought that her birthday celebration had ended last night when she left Mike inside his room. Then throughout the day, there was no mention of her birthday and to be honest, she was somewhat preoccupied with her past which was trespassing into her present.

"I..." Eleven was at a loss of words. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. The drawing room of Will's house was decorated with balloons and glittery tapes. Towards the right, the wall was alight with a string of lights that spelled a word. Will's mother had repainted the wall a few weeks back. But now six letters were etched on them using small lightbulbs; it was her name. She turned her head towards the right and laid her eyes upon a bunch of boxes wrapped with colorful gift papers.

'For me?' Eleven thought and nearly dismissed the idea until she saw her name sketched on one of them. Then she turned to the front and gasped at the people standing in front of her.

They were there, all the people Eleven had known and loved, the people who stood by her through all the pain and suffering and the people who cherished her without prejudice. Some of them adored her like a daughter, some of them loved her like a sister, some of them loved her like a friend and one of them loved her as a part of his soul. At the end of the day, they were everything she had. She desperately tried to fight back the tears that threatened to blur her vision.

Joyce came forward and hugged Eleven tightly. Then she spoke quietly, "Many many happy returns of the day" then she paused and added, "...my daughter."

Eleven was stunned by all the hubbub around her. She mumbled, "Return? Happy? Many?"

A face covered with a grungy beard but decorated with a bright smile appeared on her vision. Hopper replied, "May you get to see a hundred happy birthdays Eleven!"

Then he embraced Joyce and Eleven together, the family that he loved more than anything in the world. Eleven smiled back as Joyce released her. But then she turned around and got tackled by a bunch of bodies.

They shouted, "Three cheers for our mage. Hip hip..."

Before the chorus died down, Eleven felt a soft touch of lips on her cheek. A voice whispered, "You'll always save me..."

"...so you can save me," Eleven concluded, she knew the words in her heart now.

"Happy Birthday," the voices waned as they parted. Eleven smiled at everyone. Today was her birthday, and everyone who treasured her had arrived just like Hopper claimed they would. She was so happy that she wanted to float everyone to the ceiling or flare her powers to make the lights flicker. Love was indeed beautiful. She had never received so much affection throughout her miserable existence, and she made a promise to herself to never think about those days again.

They took Eleven to the center of the room, Mike kept his hands clasped around her eyes so she couldn't see what was in front of her. But she didn't complain, she actually enjoyed Mike's hands around her eyes. It was a sense of comfort that she had never felt before. Right then, Eleven was literally blind because she couldn't see anything. But at the same moment, she was also confident that Mike was the one seeing for her and that meant she had better vision than her own. After about ten steps, Mike took his hands off, and Eleven gasped at the sight of the table in front of her. There was a beautiful cake in front of her, shaped like two vertical bars adorned with flowery patterns. They resembled a number with two identical digits. On top of each bar, there was another pair of vertical bars representing another number with two non-identical digits. Her new age, she realized and beamed at everyone. This was something she wished for but never expected.

Eleven bent over the candles and blew hard on them. They winked out as everyone kept singing the birthday song as loud as they could. Eleven closed her eyes and remembered a dark room where a lone

child was shouting and crying at the darkness around her. Then she opened her eyes and saw the cheerful faces around her yelling at the top of their lungs. A smile spread across her face as she realized that she was born again, on her birthday. Her destiny has finally defeated her fate. Then something odd happened, the candles came back to life with a spark. Through Eleven was shocked but then she remembered a TV show she had watched some time ago.

"Magic candles," she yelled and bent over to blow them out once again. But she didn't see the sequences of expressions that played across her companions' faces. One by one they realized a few pointers. First of all, they remembered that they didn't get magic candles. So, the chances of the candles coming back to life due to a chemical reaction were practically impossible. That left them with the second option, which was that Eleven had somehow brought them back to life with her powers. But, she was just as surprised as they were about the strange phenomenon. Together, the two facts pointed towards something external, *'HOLY FUCK!'*

Before Hopper could jump towards the couch which held his gun, there was a loud knock on the door. In a moment everyone was on alert, but Eleven was beyond the state of shock. Her eyes went wide, and her mouth gaped as if she couldn't believe her senses. Joyce reached the door and nodded at Hopper who was standing behind her with an evil looking shotgun aimed straight at the opening of the door. Mike wrapped his arm around Eleven and held her tightly. With Hopper's assurance, Joyce opened the door and moved back as he immediately lifted his gun. But then he stepped back as if he was staring at a ghost.

Karen Wheeler walked in with a determined face. But Hopper was looking behind her with bewildered eyes.

Karen shouted, "Where's Jane? Where's my Jane?"

Her statement didn't have the desired effect because no one answered her question. But it did have another impact. The jaws of the people assembled in the room decided to leave their faces. But on top of that Mike's face resembled a criminal's who had just been sentenced to death. Hopper was still trying to figure out the scene behind the door while Karen located Eleven and dashed towards her. She reached her after a few steps and hugged her tightly. Then she started sobbing,

"Jane. You are alive. A...A... And you came back to me."

Mike was about to win the Nobel prize in mathematics. Through a series of sequential calculations performed at the speed of light, he came to the conclusion that Eleven was his long lost sister. And he was on the verge of losing his shit forever. Before he could cry out in anguish, Hopper stepped back, and Dr. Owens barged in. He was followed by a wheelchair carrying a strange looking woman being pushed by his father. The information didn't stay for long in Mike's mind as it devoted the maximum amount of resources to calculate alternatives where Eleven wasn't a Wheeler.

Eleven wasn't aware of this activity because she was lost inside the arms of Mike's mother. It was a strange sensation as if she just returned home after a long and impossible journey, where a cool shade welcomed her to respite, once and for all. She felt her eyes filling up with tear as she buried her face in Mike's mother's shoulder and breathed deeply, perhaps to smell her new home, but it felt like a very old one.

It felt like a big hulking structure squatting under a gigantic tree providing shade to the earth around it. This was home, at long last, she knew why she felt the unusual urge to return to Mike's basement. She wondered, *'It was here, it was always here, and inside Mike's home all along. But why?'*

But before she could get her answer, Karen gently removed Eleven from her shoulder and whispered, "Happy birthday darling. I have a surprise for you."

Then she pulled back as Ted pushed Terry in front of her daughter.

"Momma!" with a shout Eleven crashed into the lap of her mother as her instincts took over her senses. Teresa Ives was Eleven's first gift tonight, and she couldn't have been happier. Though Hopper had promised to take Eleven back to the city this week but after seeing her mother in front of her eyes, Eleven realized that her birthday party would have been incomplete without that special presence. She kissed the immobile but awake woman on the cheek and stood up. Then she turned to Mike and spoke excitedly, "Mike. This is my momma."

No boy in the history of humanity was as relieved as of how Mike felt at that moment. He realized that Eleven was not his sister and he

could finally breathe. He walked forward with a huge grin plastered on his face and reached the woman sitting on the wheelchair. But then Mike stopped there for a second and looked at his mother. He was curious about how his parents ended up bringing Eleven's mother to her birthday party. Before he could ask the question, Ted replied, "She's an old friend, son. We've known her even before you were born and she had known you even before we did."

Great, Eleven wasn't a Wheeler, but perhaps Mike wasn't either. Maybe he was actually Eleven's brother who was separated at birth from his sister and then adopted by the Wheelers. And this brought Mike back to square one. He fucking hated surprises.

The Episode continues after the break with 'Aphrodite: The Goddess of Love'

A/N: Hello people.

So, finally after a long break, I am back and have streamlined the projects. There are regular workflows to spew out a update or two every week and new projects to fill some of the gaps as well as finally venture into full fledged AU. The projects that are lined up are given below.

1. Fic 1 (untitled) - Eleven and Hopper's journey through their past as they struggle to survive 353 days of solitude - Draft completed.

2. What If Chapter 2 - Eleven returns to Mike not on the 353rd day but later on a very special day ;) - Writing

3. Unvanquished - A gritty neo noir fic set into the future where the party had outgrown their childhood, and each other - Concept finalized, pilot ready.

4. Fic 4 (Crimson Light - Working Title) - A decade after the desolation, eleven arcs leave planet Earth to find a new home but on the final ship, a young stowaway and her companion are about to discover the darkness hiding in the catacombs of the vast spaceship carrying humanity to the stars - Pilot ready.

5. Eleven - Biography - Project sent to hiatus for now. I'll restart if I get

enough interest from readers in the future.

*PS: After the last 3 months AWOL fiasco, I've decided to engage my readers continuously so they are always in touch with what's happening to both my writing as well as my ST extended universe. Since this platform doesn't provide such options, I have opened an **Instagram** profile.*

inktopia resurrect

I'll provide continuous fic updates, pilots, sneak peeks, tiny tales, quotes, poetry, concepts, timelines, reviews and recommendations of ST fics from other authors, and finally, concept video edits. You can also reach out to me via DM, channels are always open. And I take my readers very seriously, so you are more than welcome to nag me about updates and dates (no spoilers though).

Please let me know what you think about this chapter in the comments below. I feel a bit rusty after the long break.

14. E3: Pantheon - Act VII

Armageddon: Episode III - Pantheon

Act VII: Aphrodite

'Aphrodite was the Greek Goddess of Love and Beauty,

a force that wreaked havoc amongst the gods and humans alike

Yet was so essential for the greatest heroic sagas of all time'

Joyce couldn't remember the last time when she had so many guests in her house; probably a lifetime ago, back when Lonnie still pretended to be a caring father and hosted a grand birthday bash for Will to celebrate a fake family. And now, on the eve of Eleven's birthday, the circle was finally completed when Joyce threw the most splendid party to celebrate the girl who was born without a family, but people from all walks of life who had loved her had arrived, proving to Joyce once and for all that families need not be born out of marriage. Simplest things, like the affection for a destitute girl who never had a birthday in her life, were enough to bind people together, stronger than relationships born of contracts and bloodlines.

Mike and Eleven were sitting on a couch in the middle of the room along with everyone else, where Ted and Karen were taking turns explaining how they knew about Teresa. The house was surprisingly quiet for a birthday party, with a solemn silence enveloping the room which was often broken by the muffled voices of the Wheelers and the loud gasps from the audience in reaction. Even from the corner of the room where Joyce was setting some glasses on a tray, she could hear the conversation, and it was nothing short of ridiculous. Hawkins was a small town where most of the population knew one another in some way, but Eleven's mother was neither born here nor had she ever lived here. But somehow, her life had been entangled with the Wheelers even before Eleven was born, *'or is it the other way around?'* Joyce thought as she ran her eyes on the crowd surrounding Eleven and paused at Dr. Owens. The old man was listening to the story with complete attention, sometimes nodding in approval and

other times checking a notepad and noting down a few lines. He glanced at Joyce and smiled faintly as if to confirm her suspicion - *it was neither Teresa, nor the Wheelers who had found the other one, but perhaps it was Eleven who had brought these people together for some grand purpose.*

Joyce wasn't aware of all of Eleven's abilities save the ones she had discovered, but sometimes, she sensed an unfamiliar emotion radiating from the young girl - a feeling of belonging, of compassion and love that drew the mother of two kids to her aid at all costs.

"So, she named me?" Mike swallowed and aimed a shaking finger at Teresa who was staring into the void behind them, completely unaware of the events unfolding around her.

Ted sighed and confirmed, "Yes, she did."

Eleven took Karen's hand in her own and beamed, "You gave my name?"

"Yes, Jane. If Mike were a girl, I would've probably named him Jane first." Karen chuckled.

"Jane Wheeler... I like that name." Eleven grinned while Mike's face turned into a tomato as his friends started drawing heart signs in the air. Lucas even quickly bowed in front of Max as if to propose to her which was responded to by a friendly slap on his shoulder. Thankfully, no one else saw their shenanigans.

Joyce entered the crowd carrying a tray filled with an assortment of beverages and laid it down on the table.

"Shouldn't we cut the cake first?" Jonathan asked.

"It's still early in the evening. Let's wait for some time, we have a few things to discuss," Joyce replied and moved to the kitchen with the adults and left the kids on their own. Just before walking away, Karen came close to Mike and whispered in his ears, "I like the name Jane Wheeler too." And then she jogged after the others, giggling all the way and leaving Mike delighted and embarrassed, both at the same time.

As soon as they left, the kids huddled together and started chatting at the same time.

"So you two knew each other for decades?" Dustin asked excitedly. Lucas interjected, "Well, technically, they were inside their mothers' wombs. I'd say they only knew each other from the night Will disappeared."

"I think it's romantic, Stalker. Maybe I'll ask my mom who named me too."

By that time, Mike had overcome the initial shock from the profound revelation from his parents. He had imagined many ways of spending the night with Eleven, but none of them revolved around the past, going back to a time even before the two of them had ever taken their first breaths in this world. It was strangely comforting and terrifying at the same time. *'How much does Eleven's mom know?'* Mike wondered as he tried peering into the kitchen where the adults were busy discussing something, most probably what to do with Eleven's mother and also with them. His intuitions were seldom proven wrong, and right now, it was steering towards one inevitable conclusion - *their lives would not be the same anymore.*

Perhaps this was the last night when Mike Wheeler, the loser from Hawkins Middle School, would get one last chance to confess to Eleven, the mysterious girl from Hawkins National Labs, about what he had always wanted to tell her, perhaps even from a decade ago.

Right around that time, a black sedan rolled down the highway and entered a gas station at the edge of the town of Hawkins. The car stopped in front of a fuel pump, and after killing the engine, the driver climbed out and made his way to the store at the back. He spent a few minutes there, purchasing an assortment of hardware items, and then he walked to the car and handed the bag to the passengers. It took another few minutes to fill up the gas, and then the car was on its way again.

"It's a wonder what you can do with some common hardware supplies," one of the passengers took out a wire from the bag as she spoke and stripped the ends with a pair of pliers.

The man sitting beside her was carefully watching his co-passenger as she kept assembling a weird-looking contraption. He looked out through the window and replied, "The real wonder is what you could

do with humans."

"You still consider them to be humans?"

"In every sense of the way."

The woman connected a pair of batteries to the device and pressed a button. A red light attached to the side of the machine started blinking rapidly. "Armed! You sure you wanna go through this?"

"We have no other options. If Teresa did survive the blast as we feared, then without this, we don't stand a chance of taking her back, not even with the control matrix. There won't be enough time."

"Can I see it?"

The man shook his head in disagreement and replied, "You won't be able to trigger it before she blew your brains out."

"Do we have a backup plan?"

"This right here is the backup." The man took the device from the woman and scrutinized it.

Back in the Byers' residence, the occupants were divided into two groups. The adults were arguing in the kitchen, while the kids were surrounding Eleven and ushering her with compliments in the living room. She was grinning wildly at them as they kept saying a lot of things which, Joyce perceived, were not related to the more significant problems at hand. But perhaps that was for the best, after all, the adults were there to take the full brunt of the horrors of human folly, the children need not worry about them too. From the sliver of the living room visible from the kitchen, Joyce could see their kids having the time of their lives, doing things that they were supposed to do, like Mike quickly kissing Eleven as she said something that made the others laugh. *'Oh, no...'*

"I'm gonna murder that smug son of..." Hopper was about to charge out of the room when Joyce caught him. "Jim?" She lowered her voice and pointed at the others in the kitchen with a subtle nod, "Let them be."

"Joyce, did you see what that son of a bitch..." Hopper lowered his voice and added, "... is doing to my daughter?"

Then he froze as his eyes opened wide and he jerked his head to the right where Teresa was sitting in her wheelchair besides Karen. He was apparently struggling to find some words to apologize that were

not discovered yet.

Joyce smiled. "She is still your daughter. And Terry's. Mine too. Except for the Wheelers of course..." She chuckled as she saw Mike wrapping an arm around Eleven's neck and whispering something in her ear.

"You think she will call me dad someday?" Hopper lamented and turned around to enter the conversation again.

"She already does. Don't fixate on the word, Hopper. She never had a father, to begin with. Let her define her own words for the people she loves."

Dr. Owens picked up a bottle of beer from the ice-box and offered it to Hopper, who took it and downed half in one sip. Then he sat down on a chair beside Joyce.

"I think by now, all of you know about Eleven, what she was, and who she is, and perhaps what she was destined to become." Dr. Owens paused and ran his eyes on the crowd as they each nodded their heads one by one in agreement.

Mr. Clarke was holding a glass of apple juice. He coughed and spoke, "Just to be on the same page, Eleven was a subject in Hawkins National Lab who were experimenting on her psychic powers. Then she ran away from the lab, thanks to my brother, James, and then Mike found her in the woods a few years ago."

"To put it simply, yes. Everyone here knows that story. But none of you know her other past about the one who started at all."

Hopper growled, "I know who started it alright. I'm gonna blow a hole through his chest when I find that bastard."

Everyone in the room knew who he was talking about and grimaced at the thought of finding the monster again, except Dr. Owens. The old man smiled as he picked up Hopper's shotgun and handed it to him. "By all means, take your shot. She's sitting right over there."

The room couldn't have been quieter than it was now. One by one, everyone turned their wide eyes on Teresa, their mouths hanging open from the shock.

Then Karen shouted, "What the hell do you mean?"

"You know the story of Icarus, Mrs. Wheeler?" Dr. Owens asked in return.

"A Greek legend, a man who made a pair of wings to fly. In a feat of

defiance, he flew too close to the sun and burned his wings and fell to his death," Mr. Clarke replied with a quizzical look on his face.

"Not exactly. Icarus did try to defy the sun, but he didn't make the wings. His father, the master craftsman, Daedalus, forged them from feathers and wax. And as such, he was well aware of their limitations which his son conveniently ignored."

"So? She's the craftsman?" Ted asked and surprised everyone. He always had a hunch that Teresa was more than she appeared, and tonight he was vindicated at last.

"Yes, and Martin Brenner is the fool who played with a fire he was never meant to control. MKUltra was started because of her," Dr. Owens pointed at the motionless Teresa Ives and added, "But that fool changed the course of the program. He wanted to tap into Teresa's powers, Eleven was just a nice surprise that came along at the right time and burned it to ashes."

"What are her powers?" Steve asked from the corner.

"And that right there is the question I was looking for." Dr. Owens smiled and clapped his hands. "Teresa had a few minor powers, but the one that made her so dangerous, the power that took the sleep away from all the scientists in the lab, was..."

Dr. Owens paused, probably for a dramatic effect as well as to take a sip from his bottle. Then he completed his sentence, "... Bloodline Precognition."

On the other side of the house, the kids were busy taking out the gifts they had gotten for Eleven from the big pile beneath the left wall. The plan was to open them after she had cut the cake, but they still had about an hour left to spend, and this was the birthday of the girl from the upside-down, after all, so breaking the rules fit the atmosphere.

Dustin handed Eleven a tall box covered with a golden wrapping paper. She grabbed it and tried guessing what could be inside. The box was indeed heavy, and at room temperature. That ruled out Eggos, and... This is where Eleven's guesswork ended. She had never received any gifts in her life from anyone on her birthday, so trying to figure what was missing was akin to making up new words about

things that she had no idea about in the first place. And she didn't like lying to friends.

"Guess what's inside." Dustin winked at Eleven and asked.

"Eggos?" Eleven was sure it was wrong.

"Incorrect. Next?"

"Mike?" She turned to her left and asked the boy who knew everything.

"If he's sitting right beside you then he can't be inside the box. Try again."

"I don't know. I never got gifts."

"Shit." Dustin cursed and almost by instinct, got up to run away from Eleven's helpless gaze. He never thought a joke would turn so serious all of a sudden.

Mike intervened, "It's good that you don't know what's inside. That's what makes it so interesting. Right guys?" He looked more stressed than he sounded.

"Let's open it. El?" Max chatted eagerly to break the silence that was descending in the room.

"Okay." Eleven replied and closed her eyes.

The box moved on its own and oriented vertically on Eleven's lap. Then by surprising everyone, the gum tapes started peeling off one by one on their own as well. Mike immediately ran his hand inside his pocket to retrieve his handkerchief when he guessed, like others, about what was happening.

A drop of crimson appeared below Eleven's nose as the flaps of the wrapping paper started peeling away in a systematic pattern. Mike quickly pressed the soft cloth on Eleven's upper lip and gently wiped away the droplet before it could slide down and ruin her appearance. Hopper wouldn't appreciate a bloody smear on his daughter's face on the eve of her birthday, Mike was sure about that fact. But most importantly, he was becoming tired of seeing a bloody nose on his girlfriend every now and then and had decided to help out whenever needed.

The box came out of its wrapper but didn't reveal the contents because Dustin had scratched the outer layer. Max rolled her eyes in frustration but decided to keep quiet. Eleven opened her eyes and

immediately poured over the box with excitement. She opened the lid and shrieked after finding a long device with an antenna sticking out from the top.

"This is the Ranger Mach 3, the best walkie you can get that works with our sets. Now you can call us whenever you want."

"I can call Mike?"

Dustin wanted to sigh but smirked when he saw Mike's face, the boy looked as if he was given a death sentence. Of course, there was no doubt that Mike loved Eleven more than anyone else amongst them, but talking to her twenty-four across seven would really be a daunting task even for him. *'Serves him right,'* Dustin thought and grinned at Eleven who was now fearfully staring at the alien contraption. It took the better half of the next fifteen minutes to teach her how to operate it, and when all was done, she called Mike's walkie to confirm and shouted in joy when his voice echoed from the speaker less than a fraction of a second after she saw him start speaking, it was like magic.

Lucas handed Eleven a box next. It was small and wrapped with a green paper painted with army camouflage all over it. She unwrapped the case and took out a small circular device with a dial on top. There was a needle embedded beneath the glass cover that shifted ever so slightly when she moved her hand. Eleven knew what it was - a compass, the device Mike and his friends had used back then to find the lab. But there was more to it.

"Turn it over," Lucas instructed.

Eleven flipped the compass over and then following his directions, opened a small latch. The base came out and revealed a small circular compartment with a piece of folded plastic sheet.

"It's a map of the United States on one side and Hawkins on the other side. The lat and long are engraved on the base right there." Lucas pointed towards some strange numbers that made no sense to Eleven. She looked helpless.

Lucas relieved her, "Don't worry. They don't understand either. Tomorrow I'll teach you all how to use that map and that compass to get back to Hawkins, right here, from any part of the country."

Will shyly handed an envelope to Eleven next. It was very light. She unwrapped the present to find a rectangular card with a picture drawn using color pencils. Will had really put a lot of effort in portraying her, and it was evident from the close resemblance the image had with Eleven from the night she returned to Hawkins. Hair pushed back, stiff shoulders and fury burning in eyes - that was the look she must have had when she broke into the room, frightened that she might never get to see Mike again. But Eleven was sure that Will wasn't there when she returned, at least not in a condition to memorize her appearance at that exact moment. Someone must have guided him as he went about trying to turn words into reality. And then Eleven carefully observed the eyes in the image and immediately realized who had described the appearance to Will. There was a drop of blue tear at the corners of each of her eyes - *'Mike!'* she thought and fought the urge to hug him tightly once again.

There were a few numbers etched beside strange symbols on the card, and they didn't make any sense to her, but Mike and his party understood. Dustin was the first to shout, "Three hundred? Are you nuts? That would make her the most powerful force in every reality of d&d..." The confusion in his face turned into awe as he stared at Eleven, the girl who had actually defeated a real-life Mind Flayer just a few months ago. Max groaned, "Epic nerds, the lot of you."

Mike gave a smug smirk; apparently, he was onboard the idea from the very beginning, so was Lucas. They high fived each other. Dustin gave up and sat down again as Max handed Eleven her present.

It was a small cosmetic box. There were various items stacked neatly inside that none of the boys had any actual clue about, though Mike had tried using a few to give a makeover to Eleven a long time ago. But Eleven was just as clueless as they were. Max looked at their faces and started laughing, "Don't stare for too long. You guys might turn cute again."

Eleven picked up a lipstick and opened the cap. Then she stared at it for some time, thinking about the time Mike had used one to make her look pretty. *'Am I still pretty?'*

Before Eleven could think further, she felt a soft pair of lips on her cheek. "Still really pretty."

She blushed when she heard Mike's voice assuring her for the hundredth time that she was still as beautiful as she was when she had run into his arms all those nights ago. That was the thing about Mike, she never had to tell him about her insecurities and fears, about her nightmares and misfortunes, he always knew. And he always felt, and cared and took all of her pain away in the end. No one had ever made Eleven feel this way, not her other friends in this room and not the different subjects from the lab.

"So, you didn't need a rouge, it seems."

Max's mocking tone brought Eleven out of her dreams, and she suddenly felt hot around her cheeks. Quickly, she turned to Mike and asked, "What do you have?"

Everyone stopped laughing and turned their attention to Mike, *this was the endgame*. Mike and Eleven did not have the slightest clue about the bet running between their friends about what Mike's present might be. Dustin was thinking of Eggos, so was Lucas, and unsurprisingly Will was thinking about Eggos as well. Max was initially thinking about something, but after looking at Mike's innocent face, dismissed the indecent idea and thought about kisses.

Eleven wasn't thinking about anything, she had no sense in this regard at all. She knew that it wasn't Eggos, they already had that last night. Of course, Mike wouldn't kiss her properly in front of their friends, not that there was anything odd about it, but he was a bit shy. Apart from that, there wasn't anything Mike could have given her that would be better than a kiss.

Maybe to prove them all wrong, or perhaps because he was Mike Wheeler, he lifted his arm and held it in front of Eleven. There was nothing in his palm. However, Will noticed that Mike was wearing a full-sleeved sweater with loose arms. Slowly, Mike lifted pulled the sleeve back and revealed a small patch of his wrist.

The party went crazy.

"Are you shitting me?" Dustin shouted.

Lucas slapped his own forehead and sighed, "Is that permanent?"

"Yup."

Will turned his around towards the kitchen and asked nervously, "Do your parents know?"

"Nope. Nancy knows. She said she'll save me if they find out."

"That's not even the same one as hers."

"I never wanted to copy that number."

When all this bickering was going on, Eleven was holding Mike's wrist and reading the letters, "E... L... El!"

She glanced at Mike with a heavy heart, some things can never be erased, and he had voluntarily etched such a curse on his wrist. It might not have said zero one one, but the monster hiding behind the two names were the two sides of the same coin. One with bare fangs and the other one with a faint makeup of humanity to hide the scars and tremors of unimaginable horrors.

"Mike?" Eleven whispered.

"I..."

They stopped speaking as Mike started, and the sudden silence made him pause for a second. Then he almost inaudibly whispered, "There is nothing I can give you El, that you don't already have." He waved his arm towards their friends, and then to the adults inside the kitchen.

'That's not true.' Eleven thought.

"Well, there's me. I can give you a lot of things and... Eww... Nooo... Max?"

Max was looking at the other direction, feigning ignorance. With a flushed face, Mike continued, "But still, it won't be enough. I really had no idea what to get you, a star wars toy? A lifetime of Eggos? A kiss? I could damn well marry you, but that isn't what you need right now."

Then he was forced to withdraw as a series of oohs and aahs went around them.

"Did you... Did you just propose to her?" Max covered her mouth.

"What? No! I mean, yes... Wait... What?" Mike was looking at all of them as if he had just been thrown off a cliff and realization kept

dawning on him as the ground came hurling at him at hundreds of miles an hour.

Max clarified, "You just asked her to marry you. You dumb rock."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"Noo. Guys?"

Lucas and Dustin glanced away while Will innocently answered, "Well. You did just say you could marry her, right now. Like you asked her."

"I didn't specifically say, El? Will you marry me?" Mike protested weakly.

"Yes."

"El? Keep out of this... WHAT?"

The entire group was stunned. Mike thought they would need a new way to describe this situation, awkward silence wouldn't even come close to cutting it anymore. Then he heard a loud burst of laughter coming from Max, followed by Lucas and then the rest as they crashed into the floor. The only two people not laughing at the moment were Mike and Eleven. Mike was now looking like the guy who had been thrown off the cliff earlier and was now about to hit the ground. Eleven was awfully pleased with herself, she was smiling at Mike as if he was the only thing that mattered in the world right now. She was not so sure about what marriage meant, but it sounded like something she would very much enjoy doing with him, so she had said yes. And although Mike was turning all shades of red as he argued with their friends, Eleven knew that he was remarkably happy with her answer.

Suddenly the doorbell rang and shattered the tranquility in the house. The kids immediately became alert and turned their heads towards the door. But then Steve shouted from the kitchen, "It's the pizza. Grab my wallet from the desk and pay him."

Dustin slowly got up and went to the desk. The doorbell rang again,

the deliveryman was clearly impatient. He took out the cash and went to the entrance and stopped there. After receiving a smile of confidence from his friends, he opened the door and froze in shock.

At the middle of the room, huddling around the couch, the other kids were busy discussing Mike's impromptu proposal to Eleven, and none of them initially noticed Dustin who was standing in front of the door, powerless to move. But then Will saw Eleven's frozen eyes and turned around. "Dustin?"

The kids immediately got up from the seats. "Dustin? You alright?" Mike asked while trying to suppress the knot inside his abdomen.

Slowly, Dustin took a step back, then another, all the while keeping his eyes locked to whoever was standing in front of the house at the moment. He blinked a few times as if to clear his vision and then crashed back into the ground with a faint scream once he was sure that he wasn't dreaming. Mike and the others instinctively tried to run forward but found themselves arrested by an invisible force.

"Don't move," Eleven whispered from the back in a raspy tone. The sense of dread was palpable in her voice. Then as if to prove their worst nightmares right, Doctor Martin Brenner walked into the room with a smile on his face and closed the door.

And thus ends the story of Eleven's birthday, the first one she ever had and maybe the last one where she would see all her friends together. The course of history teaches us a valuable lesson - one cannot run away from darkness. The shade will chase them until the end of time, to the very depths of the cosmos, to their farthest dreams and nearest nightmares. Until one day they rise above the suffering and burn it to ashes, everything now rests on destiny.

A/N: Coming up next: **Armageddon Book 7 - Icarus**. The story of the man who defied humanity and was consumed by the shadow in his path to righteousness.